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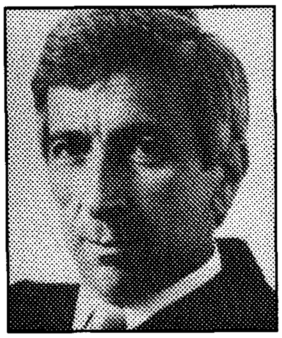

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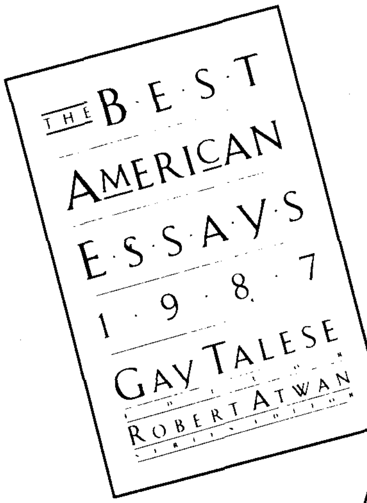
Gay Talese, essayist, critic, and novelist, demonstrates a taste for the risky, the provocative, and the unexpected in his selections for **The Best American Essays 1987**. Here is Robert Stone on cocaine, Richard Ben Cramer on Ted Williams, Phyllis Rose on tools of torture—and the result is a feast of spicy food for thought. Robert Atwan is the series editor. A Ticknor & Fields book.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Whatever is new, fresh, and exciting; whatever is the finest in traditional workmanship—both come together under the covers of **The Best American Short Stories 1987**. Edited this year by **Ann Beattie** with series editor Shannon Ravenel, the anthology again offers the best vintage of the 1980's. Side by side are the first-rank authors of today—such as Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff, and Sue Miller—along with the bright new talents who will be the talk of the 1990's. As The Boston Review remarked, this anthology "reminds us that a short story can be a major work."

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

■

When we proposed in June that we were prepared to rededicate ourselves to non-fiction—especially non-fiction concerned with the matter of salvaging the planet from its excesses—we little reckoned on the response the proposal would provoke. *Please don't,* was the collective reaction of the NAR's readership, the consensus being that there is plenty of moralizing in the world, but precious little of good story-telling. A couple of subscribers threatened to cancel if we cut back on fiction; many others grumbled; the majority hung in loyally, but urged us to reconsider our decision. In short, we thought we were taking the pulse of the NAR's Constant Reader, but we must have got hold of someone else's wrist.

Suffice it to say that although some have read too much into our earlier announcement—for it was never our intention to sacrifice all fiction on some vague altar of noble crusade—we have given the question of this magazine's future emphasis considerable thought. Let us clarify:

Fiction will continue to occupy the lion's share of our pages—it is, after all, a genre we "do" well, thanks to an array of fine writers who offer us their work at prices far below those paid by the larger magazines we compete with. At the same time, we intend to make full use of the talents of our other editors, who pursue interests in ecology, agriculture, politics, poetry, travel, eccentricity, and—if we may say it without seeming sentimental—the vagaries of the human heart. A balanced diet, says the doctor; all things in moderation, says the philosopher; a place for everything, says the NAR's long tradition.

In this number: ample fiction. Five longish stories and a large sampling of the very brief stories for which we are justly praised and scorned, depending on your literary viewpoint. The current crop of "four-minute fictions" ranges from serious to frivolous, restrained to outrageous.

Also in this number: ample non-fiction. Not only the usual departments, but a long and keenly-observed essay on Nature, by Lance Kinseth. It's been a while since we were fortunate enough to print so sensitive a praise of River, of Earth, of Sun.

Of note: Erin McGraw, whose "Accepted Wisdom" begins on page 56, is one of the fiction winners in this year's General Electric Young Writers competition, for a story published in the *Georgia Review*. And books of interest to NAR readers include: *The Melting Pot,* by Lynne Sharon Schwartz (Harper & Row), *And He Tells the Little Horse the Whole Story,* by Steve Barthelme (Johns Hopkins), and *Come to Africa and Save Your Marriage,* by Maria Thomas (Soho Press)—all story collections; *Fatal Light* (Dutton/Seymour Lawrence), a novel by Richard Currey; and *The Book of Knowledge* (Carnegie-Mellon), poems by Dara Wier. ☐

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The Mongrel Islands

CONGER BEASLEY, JR.

Grand Turk Island is a different place, as far removed from the stereotypical Caribbean paradise as can be imagined. Clustered at the foot of the Bahamian archipelago, 80 miles north of the big island of Hispaniola (containing Haiti and the Dominican Republic), are more than 40 low, flat, scrubby, coral protrusions, officially belonging to the British Government and collectively known as the Turks and Caicos Islands. Grand Turk is the capital and administrative center of this scattered complex; six miles long by two miles wide, Grand Turk boasts a population of 4,000 people, most of whom rely upon Her Majesty's Government for economic support.

My first view of the island wasn't especially appetizing. A narrow trough of unfathomably deep water separates Grand Turk from the Caicos Islands to the west. As the aircraft banked over the cobalt blue depths, I caught a glimpse of a squat, pork-chop-shaped wedge of land, seemingly devoid of trees or prominent features. A narrow calcareous ridge runs from north to south like a buffer wall a scant few yards from the Atlantic coast. The ridge, matted along the slopes with a thick growth of shrubs, forms the highest point on the island. The lowlands of the interior are dominated by a glittery salina or salt pool. Well into the 20th century this salina and a similar one on nearby Salt Cay provided the primary economic resource for the islands. Channels cut to the ocean permitted salt water to inundate portions of the interior, choking off all vegetable growth and animal life. Fanned by tall, creaky windmills, the water quickly evaporated in the hot sun; the residue of crunchy salt particles were then raked into piles and sold to Canadian and Bermudan merchants as a preservative for their stocks of cod and halibut and haddock.

With the invention of refrigerated cargo holds, the modest industry collapsed, and today the salinas are no longer farmed; they ooze across the desolate landscape like opaque cataracts, garish, ugly tracks of dead water where nothing grows and no one cares to go. From the ridge on the Atlantic side, looking west into the afternoon sun, the Grand Turk salina resembles an abandoned strip mine. A noxious odor wafts off the gluey surface and drifts over the native section of town. Nothing lives for very long in this fetid slime; a literal wasteland of biological negativity, there's something apocalyptic about its very presence.

A local historian claims that the island was once rich with tropical vegetation. Where the salina extends today was an inland lagoon, fringed with marshes, commodious enough to shelter ocean-going ships. In the early 19th century Bermudan entrepreneurs descended upon the island and cut down the trees and destroyed the delicate balance between freshwater sources and those from the sea. The result was an ecological disaster that turned Grand Turk into an arid region of shadeless stone and stagnant water. In return, the Bermudans built several sturdy old homes out of imported timber, like the one that now serves as the main building of the Salt Raker Inn.

My first night at the Salt Raker I met an Englishman in his 60s named Douglas Houseman. I confess to being a sucker for anachronisms, and this fellow was clearly one; he appeared to have stepped right out of the pages of the Somerset Maugham novel I was reading. He sported a bristly mustache with the tips honed to rapier points; his eyes were moist and cerulean blue; he spoke with an impeccable Oxbridge accent. He was a bit down on his luck, and had been for some time; we talked about money for a while, and how it had always seemed to elude him.

He had a distinguished war record, details of which were still hush-hush, something about aiding Greek partisans on Crete in their struggle against the Germans. For the price of a few beers, he regaled me with interesting stories, not only about his wartime exploits but about Middle Caicos, a largely uninhabited island where he had lived for several years.

"It's a perfectly splendid place, you know, pristine and unspoiled," he said with enthusiasm. "The people speak a patois which not even they know the origins of, and which takes some getting used to. There are coves and anchorages too numerous to count; tall, limestone cliffs concealing secret caves; miles of beaches on which no human foot has ever set; and vegetation of a variety and density that makes Grand Turk look like the Gobi Desert. And the beauty of it is that the place is hard to get to, and once you're there, there's virtually no place to stay. So, no tourists with any of their rigmarole and claptrap; if you go to Middle Caicos, you're serious about seeing the place."

I learned a lot from Douglas that first night. Development on the Turks and Caicos Islands, even by Caribbean standards, has been painfully slow. In the last decade, Providenciales Island in the Caicos group, located a hundred miles west of Grand Turk, has enjoyed something of a boom. A Club Med has opened there, along with several other resorts. Anyone seeking the conventional amenities of the ordinary Caribbean spa goes there. They do not go to Grand Turk, which has only a few rustic inns like the Salt Raker scattered along the west coast within easy walking distance of the modest quai and government offices downtown.

I like islands for many reasons, one being that, unlike continents, their landmass is readily traversable. Grand Turk lends itself to exploration by bicycle rather than on foot, though once it has been crossed, there's little to return to for a second look. The southern tip features the remains of an old fort, a shady copse of Australian pines, and a sheltered cove that has protected ships since Columbus's time, and probably long before that. The north end has an abandoned lighthouse and several buildings that once comprised a U.S. Naval Installation. In the 1960s NASA erected a tracking station on the island, which, in conjunction with the naval base, helped pump up the fragile economy. When both pulled out in the 1970s, a depression from which it has not yet recovered struck the island.

The star attraction for future tourism might be the incredibly beautiful seas that lap the coasts of all the islands in the Turks and Caicos. A scant few hundred yards off the west coast of Grand Turk, the pellucid Caribbean plunges from a depth of 40 feet to well over a mile. The change in color is dramatic; the creamy white sand vanishes abruptly into a trough of inky blackness that would chill the imagination of Herman Melville. Along the edge of this spectacular drop-off, shy creatures from the pelagic depths are frequently observed by scuba divers.

Over dinner one night a Foreign Service veteran of 30 years named John Coulter reminisced fondly about his early tours in Equatorial Africa in the days before independence, when British officials dressed in black tie for dinner. He despised the Turks and Caicos Islands for the inefficiency of the government and the relentless stupidity of the natives. "No one knows how to administer colonies anymore," he sighed ruefully. "And there's really no place left where they can go and learn."

It was from John that I heard about Salt Cay, which I flew over to the following day. It was a five-minute flight over a shallow channel threaded with slimy strips of red algae and splotched with pan shoals and coral heads. I was the only passenger aboard the twin-engine craft. The deep trough of Grand Turk Channel glowed in the bright sun like a slab of marble. Salt Cay, shaped like an isosceles triangle with the apex pointing east toward the Atlantic Ocean, looked bleak and hot and treeless. It was smaller than Grand Turk, maybe half the size. The main settlement, consisting of 400 people, was strung along the thin, sandy margin of the west coast. From the air the place looked like the least habitable island of any I had ever seen in the Caribbean. The pilot buzzed the airstrip—a narrow track gouged out of oölitic limestone—to shoo away the donkeys foraging at the edges. A few minutes later we landed with a bounce, the wheels groaning in protest.

I ate a big breakfast at Lovelace's, a rustic little hideaway tucked along a splendid stretch of pristine beach that offered a sweeping view across the channel to Grand Turk, seven miles distant. The manager of the place, who was also the owner's son, was friendly and helpful; when he saw that I had foolishly forgotten to bring a hat, he loaned me one. I was grateful for the gift; after a hearty breakfast of pancakes and eggs, I tramped through a humid mass of steamy air into the interior of the island. The rolling terrain was broken into a series of cascading hills and narrow valleys, thickly matted with spiny shrubs and thorn bushes. Doves and warblers flitted between the branches. Along the rim of a marshy freshwater pond floated a variety of ducks and grebes. Dusty paths marked by numerous donkey prints threaded up and over the hills, and by following them I managed to avoid tearing my clothes on the sharp bushes. Paralleling the two-mile long east coast of Salt Cay was a narrow, humpbacked ridge crowned at one point with the ruins of an old manor house. Panting laboriously, I finally reached the house after an hour's hard climb and was rewarded with a hawk's-eye view of the entire island.

The view was stunning: stark white beaches fringed the coastline; the dark shroud of South Caicos Island loomed at the western sea edge like a ghostly ship; between the ridge and the coastal settlement, glowing in the sun like the milky scales of a dead fish, was the wasted blight of an abandoned salina. Up on the ridge, scattered throughout the empty rooms of the mysterious house, was an amazing amount of glass and pottery and china shards, indicative of the fact that, long ago, someone had entertained quite lavishly on this isolated rock eyrie.

The west side of the ridge was bounded with low rock walls, evidently marking property lines; I followed one down to the lowlands, where I was immediately engulfed in a cloud of damp heat. Two donkeys watched me curiously from a patch of shrubs. They seemed, in the absence of any significant human population, the true inhabitants of the island, the rightful inheritors of whatever legacy this barren place might offer. The expression on their cadaverous faces was faintly puzzled, as if they wondered what I could possibly be doing there. After thrashing for another hour through tangled brush, finding paths and then losing them, startling flocks of small doves that exploded into flight with a fluttery rush of wings, I began to wonder too. Fortunately, I intersected an automobile track leading into town and trudged along it, past gaily painted houses with tin roofs and gnarly hibiscus trees flowering in stony yards.

By this time it was early afternoon, and the sun flamed overhead like a merciless beacon, illuminating every bush and stone. I felt squishy and swollen and damp all over. Compared to Grand Turk, the streets of Salt Cay were tidy and well-kept. At this time of day there was nothing astir; a cat snoozed fitfully in a sliver of shade cast by a tilted tombstone in a neglected graveyard by the sea. A light wind turned the rotting blades of an old windmill in the center of the gloomy salina. The main drag following the beach was sparsely fronted by stone and timber dwellings, with a few cars parked out front, dented and rusty, looking like old turtles that had just climbed out of the sea. I had reached an end of sorts; from here, the road dropped off into a bewildering depth of emptiness and desolation, beyond reclamation of either memory or imagination.

The street was deserted; through cloistered doorways, cool and black against the blazing walls, I saw several figures peering out like shy animals. Mad dogs and Englishmen. Who else but a silly white man would subject himself to the rigors of such burning air on an island where few strangers have ever stepped for the last hundred years? Where the road turned back east toward the airstrip

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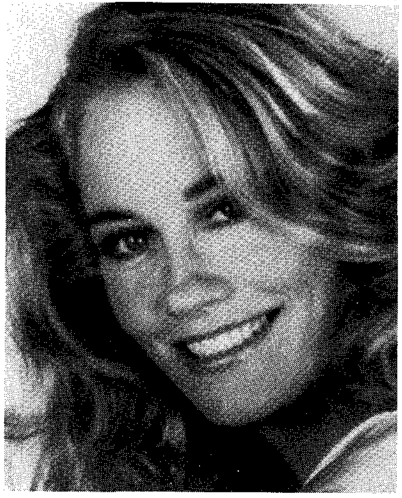

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and Lovelace's, I encountered a solitary man, dressed as if he were going to church in a clean white shirt, green polyester coat, and checkered trousers, shuffling somnambulistically through the gravid air. We stared at each other like survivors of an atomic quake. The heat rose up around us in palpable swells. His eyes floated upon the murky brown surface of his face like croutons on a thin film of soup. "What you be doin' out in dis heat t'day, mon?" he asked in a dry, croaky voice.

I had no answer. My mouth was incapable of response. It felt as if a stork had constructed a twiggy nest deep inside my throat. My cheeks were flushed, and a cool tingling—the first sign of heat prostration?—danced up and down my arms. I waved listlessly and staggered the rest of the way to Lovelace's where I gulped three beers and collapsed into a hammock. The manager scolded me for my foolishness. "You don't ever want to walk around by yourself on this island, not even in the moonlight," he declared. I groaned and nodded in agreement. Three hours later, somewhat revitalized, I hobbled to the airstrip and helped a boy throw rocks at the donkeys to clear them off the landing path. Then, weary but curiously fulfilled, I boarded an aircraft and roared back through the gathering dusk to Grand Turk.

The next day I remained in a stupor. All morning, as I tried to keep my eyes focused upon the pages of the Maugham novel, my stomach felt finicky. Right after lunch I got sick. I spent the afternoon sprawled in a lounge chair under the shadow of an overhanging porch, staring out at the sea. Around two, during the muggiest part of the day, a black man strolled along the narrow rockwalled lane between the Salt Raker Inn and the beach. He wore wrap-around dark glasses, a porkpie hat, white shirt and paisley tie, a beige vest, creamy brown slacks, and blue Adidas tennis shoes. One of those inimitable Caribbean figures, timeless and totally self-contained, clad in a mishmash of sartorial styles, coming from nowhere and going nowhere. In his right hand he carried a sleek metallic briefcase. He walked with an odd sort of laconic strut, pleased, no doubt, to find himself heading downtown on some kind of official business, though in no particular hurry to get there. For a moment, as he passed by the gate, his narrow-brimmed hat bobbed along the line of the distant horizon like some sort of bizarre ship.

By the following day I had recovered enough to rent a bicycle and attempt to pedal to the east side of the island. Beyond the salina, on the outskirts of the native section of town, stretched a vast ugly junkyard, heaped and stacked with abandoned appliances and rusty automobiles. A dirt track branched off the paved road toward the barrier ridge. I followed it, and within a quarter mile came to a pretty marsh fringed with bright green grass, situated in a modest hollow between two limestone knolls. I slipped off the bike and rubbed my eyes. Where had this place come from? Though treeless, it was certainly the most verdant and appealing spot I had seen on Grand Turk Island.

Bob Marley music cut through the air with a ragged, lilting beat. I looked around. A man sat on top of one of the knolls, cradling a boom box in his arms and smoking a long twisted spliff. Though I was only 50 yards away, he paid no attention to me and gazed out over the pleasant little spot toward the big ridge that walled off the Atlantic coast. I felt as if I had intruded upon someone's private sanctuary. Just where does one go to get away from the incontestable fact of a limited life on the narrow confines of an impoverished island? If Salt Cay had the feeling of being located at the very limits of the Caribbean imagination, Grand Turk was the New World promise traduced and undermined by colonial patronage and racial inferiority. A glum depression stole over me like a mantle. I had no right, not even for one minute, to share this pretty spot with the man on the hill. Quickly, I mounted the bicycle and pedaled back toward the paved road.

Mongrelization is a cultural reality of many Caribbean countries, composed, as they are, of contrasting European and African influences. (The Native American presence, ruthlessly purged by Columbus and his followers, is barely detectable.) Unlike Haiti or Jamaica, whose disparate backgrounds have merged to create New World amalgams, the inhabitants of the Turks and Caicos Islands seem to possess neither rebelliousness nor a well-developed sense of emulative acquiescence that might at least make them over into model clones of their masters. Desultory occupation by Spanish, French, and British powers have given the social and cultural fabric of the islands a crazy patchwork complexion, with no single influence predominating. For a while in the last century the islands were administered by Bermuda; for several decades in this century Jamaica was in control. Evidently, this is a region that nobody seems to want, that has no exploitable resource, that offers little promise for the future, that seems destined to remain a squalid and undernourished backwater outpost.

Currently, a ponderous British bureaucratic apparatus lies like an insupportable lid over the top of this provincial dustbin; though even if it were removed, there appears to be little guarantee that anything vital or indigenous or nationalistic might rise to the surface. Grand Turk and Salt Cay are not so much representative of the Third World as they are of an anachronistic classification of colonial trusts seemingly incapable, for obvious economic reasons, of steering their own course amid the perils of contemporary life. If the French controlled the island, at least there would be a decent restaurant or two; the Spanish would make sure that certain festival days were celebrated; but under the dour hand of the British, the islanders are treated like poor relatives, uneducable above their present status, an embarrassment, not only to their fellow colonials on Anguilla, Montserrat, and Grand Cayman, but to their bolder, independent, and more successful black compatriots in the Caribbean.

From all evidence, the people appear resigned to a drab fate that has cast them up on these bleak shores, stoically inured to living out their lives in a poverty of expectations, like clams baking haplessly under a ruthless sun. No doubt there are subterranean political and racial forces brewing under the dull glaze of resignation, but with nothing to fuel them, nothing to give them voice, no energy or consciousness or motivating intelligence to give them form or recognition, the likelihood of their ever erupting into reality appears dim indeed. As Douglas Houseman lamented, "There's no such thing here as 'a usable past'. These people don't even have a history. How,

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then, are they to know what it is they need to react against?"

One evening an energetic group gathered at the Salt Raker for drinks and dinner, a mixed bag of American engineers, foreign officers, and local characters. Other than myself and a woman from Guyana, there were no tourists. The Americans were constructing a desalinization plant on the island to help ease the water supply problem. "Holiday Inn wants to build a big complex here," one engineer said, "but until the water problem is solved they won't invest a penny. Years ago, the only water the islanders had was from cisterns and catch basins and what they could draw out of wells. Today, they have the wells and the desalinization plant, but that's not nearly enough to meet the demands of the complex that Holiday Inn wants to build."

While John Coulter and the Guyanese woman and I ate dinner, Douglas Houseman remained alone at the bar, nursing a beer and sifting through an enormous stack of mail. The Salt Raker Inn was his official post office box on Grand Turk, and for a man who appeared to have few friends and virtually no family, he certainly received a lot of mail. "Poor Doug," John sighed through a mouthful of spicy chicken and rice, "The stories about his partisan exploits are absolutely true, you know. He had some incredible adventures. He was a full colonel at age 23, and after the war he was honored by the Greek government. That's a tough act to follow. Must make the rest of one's life seem rather anticlimactic."

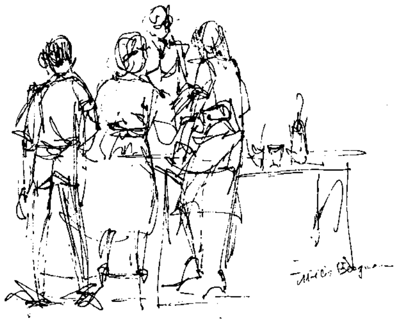
After dinner more people arrived. The bar did a brisk business; instead of folding the place up and turning out the lights by 8 p.m., as was usual on a Wednesday evening, Graham Barker, the Salt Raker manager, was busy mixing drinks and pouring wine and opening beers. By nine, the dinner hubbub had intensified to a cocktail party buzz. Coulter introduced me to David Long, a prominent official in the local government, a short, robust, thickset man with curly hair and a square, sanguine face. Whenever David addressed me, he had the disconcerting habit of squeezing his eyes shut—whether out of shyness or arrogance or a sharp spell of gas I couldn't tell; for whatever reason, he did not care to look into my eyes.

He was adamant, despite evidence to the contrary, including a recent *National Geographic* article, that Grand Turk, and not Watling Island or Samana Cay in the Bahamas, was the site of Columbus's original landfall in the New World. He cited evidence from the explorer's journals, and declared that at some future date a team of Spanish historians would reveal the results of an exhaustive survey on the subject. "We are definitely a contender for the 500th anniversary sweepstakes in 1992," he said, squeezing his eyes shut and rolling his head oddly about. "Grand Turk has a lot going for it in that department. In fact, where we are sitting right now could very well be the exact spot where Columbus first set foot on American soil."

The hairs on the back of my neck bristled appreciatively.

"We know that he first spotted the island from the Atlantic side," David went on, "but that he then sailed around to the west coast in order to escape the heavy surf. The other islands that he mentions as all being visible from Grand Turk tally perfectly today. From the mast of a good-sized vessel at the south cove, for instance, an observer can see Salt Cay, Cotton Cay, South and Middle Caicos. Yes, I think we have a very strong case, which we intend to capitalize upon as far as tourism is concerned. You Americans can blather all you want about Watling Island or Samana Cay or any other island in the Bahamas. We're convinced that it was right here."

Later, I walked out on the beach with the woman from Guyana. From England originally, she had married a doctor from Georgetown and lived there for nearly 30 years. Her nursing specialty was leprosy, which still plagues that strange jungle country. When I asked her what prompted her to devote her life to caring for people afflicted with such a gruesome disease, she replied that the sacrifices she had seen her fellow countrymen make in World War II inspired her to a career of helping others.



"You've been away from England nearly three decades now," I said. "Do you miss it? Would you like someday to retire there?"

"I dream of England nearly every night now," she replied. "Especially of the rolling countryside of West Suffolk where I was raised. All my family there is gone, except one distant cousin with whom I still correspond. My husband died last year, and my son now lives in Miami. I suspect, when the time comes for me to retire, that I will join him there."

A tall figure emerged from the front gate of the Salt Raker Inn and ambled across the narrow lane to the beach. "Good evening, Douglas," I called.

"Ah well, yes, it's you, is it?"

The voice cut through the moist air with the vibrato of a tuning fork. Moonlight suffused the beach with a tinseled glow; a few yards from where we stood pale, lemony waves broke with a gentle slush against the sand. In the eerie light I could discern the whites of Douglas's eyes and the flamboyant silhouette of his mustache. "Well, it's pleasant enough to be out, eh?" he called.

"Indeed, it is."

There was a pause; then he said, "I never tire of it, you know. Moonlight like this. White combers charging to shore like stallions. And the air. My God, it's practically drinkable!"

A few thin clouds drifted overhead, but for the most part the sky was gorgeously clear. To the west, far out over the ocean and trailing down to the horizon like a thick cluster of grapes, was a mass of palpitating stars. A three-quarters moon drifted over the barrier ridge to the east, sheening the arid ground, the native section of town, the dull blob of the salina, in a dusky, metallic light. In the yard next to the Salt Raker, its scruffy neck darkly etched in moonglow, a donkey stretched up over a rock wall to nibble the blossoms off a wispy bougainvillaea plant.

"Well then," Douglas called, "cheerio. It's time I was off to bed."

"Pleasant dreams," I called.

"I've never dreamed a single night since I've lived in these islands," he confessed. "When you live in paradise, there's really nothing much to dream about, is there?"

*

One morning near the end of my stay, I awoke to find the western sky ascowl with brooding rainclouds and a stiff wind whipping the sea into a lather of spumy foam. Out on the beach, I watched a lanteen-rigged Haitian boat pitch away from the storm toward the protected cove at the south tip of the island. Two donkeys trotted out of the rainy air, crossed the lane, and began cropping at the vines and sea oats tufting the beach. One clomped up behind me and nudged my arm. "What's up, pal?" I muttered. The beast stared at me with indefatigable patience, not expecting anything, yet ready for any gift that might come its way. When I reached out to stroke its nose, it snorted rudely and clattered away.

A small boat moored to a buoy had overturned in the high seas, and several young British civil servants stood at the edge of the beach discussing the best way to salvage it. I joined them, and after some debate we decided to strip down and swim out there and see what we could do. The buoy was a good hundred yards from shore, and a half-dozen of us paddled through unseasonably cool water, into the teeth of a ripping wind. Despite the swells that pitched us about like corks, we managed to righten the boat and attach a cable to the bow. The cable stretched to a truck parked on the beach; with a grating whine the winch commenced to turn, and within minutes the boat was high and dry on the sand.

It was Sunday morning, and many locals were walking or bicycling along the narrow lane to the Anglican Church in town. They were dressed in their best finery, the men in dark suits, the women in white-starched skirts; many of them carried Bibles. The swimmers had just returned to the beach and were drying off when a long black automobile with twin Union Jack pennants flying from the bumpers slowed to a halt, and from the back seat, resplendently clad in a crisp white uniform and pith helmet, stepped the governor-general of the island. "I say, everything all right here?" he called.

"Oh, yes sir, yes sir," several voices chorused in return. "Everything's under control."

"Jolly good then. Carry on."

The car disappeared down the lane. I finished toweling off and slipped on a pair of trousers. Out to sea, the Haitian boat continued to bob south, its tattered sail gleaming like a silver wing against the glowering storm clouds. The locals, singly and in modest groups, continued to plod down the lane toward town, oblivious of the British and their friends, like extras in a play with no costumes, little drama, and nothing at all to say. □

DAVID BARBER

THE DARK AGES

Half a century from now, the boy whose face
is penny-radiant between the smoking lanterns
will not remember the name of the bear.

And he will not remember which slow waltz
the piano hammered out, though he will know
it was familiar and blamed some crime on the moon.

On the other side of the river, an open window
is waiting for him. A chinaberry tree
is forking under the sill. The room will be

smaller when he finally crawls back in
and come morning the bedsheets will smell
of tobacco and kerosene. And whiskey, somehow.

And the world will tilt toward poverty and war.
But here, and now, he's trying to understand
why everyone is jeering, why the eyes of the bear

are bloodshot and glassy, as if with tears.
Her ankle-shackle and string of pearls shine.
There are men in the throng who outweigh her.

And when she weaves and lurches like a
punchdrunk fighter, laughter swells in time,
sawdust rises and swirls and the gold tooth

of the piano player gleams. It will seem
to the boy, a lifetime later, that the bear
was on fire, that at any given moment

his own face might have burst into flames.
He will not remember the name on the handbills
but on summer nights he will tell his grandchildren

that when he was young the very moon
was a scorching lump of coal above the freightyards
and men and beasts alike danced for their lives.

■

I think a river is the most beautiful thing in nature. *Any* river. Some are more beautiful than others, but any river is more beautiful than anything else I know. It excites me more to write about a river than to write about violence in the streets. And if that's what excites me then, by God, that's what I'm going to write about.

James Dickey, *Self-Interviews*

It has nothing of its own but takes everything, changing into as many different natures as there are different places in its course, acting just like a mirror which takes in as many changes as there are things passing in front of it.

Leonardo da Vinci

I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river
Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and untraceable,
Patient to some degree, at first recognized as a frontier;
Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyer of commerce;
Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.
The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten
By dwellers in cities—ever, however, implacable,
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder
Of what men choose to forget. Unhonored, unpropitiated
By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and waiting.

T.S. Eliot, from "The dry salvages," *Four Quartets*

By it the heavens are related to the earth, undistinguishable from a sky beneath you.

Henry David Thoreau

"Is it not true, my friend, that the river has very many voices? Has it not the voice of a king, of a warrior, of a bull, of a night bird, of a pregnant woman and a sighing man, and a thousand other voices?"

"It is so," nodded Vasudeva, "the voices of all living natures are in its voice" . . . . They both listened silently to the water, which to them was not just water, but the voice of life, the voice of Being, of perpetual Becoming.

Hermann Hesse, *Siddartha*

To stick your hands into the river is to feel the cords that bind the earth together in one piece.

Barry Lopez, *River Notes*

You cannot bathe twice in the same river.

Heraclitus, quoted in R.W. Emerson,
"The method of nature."
Collected Works

Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they had all gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth? . . . . the dreams of men, the seeds of commonwealths, the germs of empires.

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

. . . I lay back in the floating position that left my face to the sky, and shoved off. The sky wheeled over me . . . . I had the sensation of sliding down the vast tilted face of the continent . . . . Moving with me, leaving its taste upon my mouth and sprouting under me in dancings springs of sand was the immense body of the continent itself, flowing like the river was flowing, grain by grain, mountain by mountain, down to the sea.

Loren Eiseley, *The Immense Journey*

River evolution may be a truer paradigm for evolution as a whole than the apparently more orderly and schematic land evolution. Like a river, evolution runs in fast and slow stretches, in floods and trickles, sometimes doubles back on itself, is at once destructive and creative. Science's vague picture of river evolution may reflect our true state of knowledge better than the seemingly more complete land model. And the flow of both rivers and evolution is threatened by the monument-building, geological aspect of civilization, which is wiping out large sections of both by attempting to channel their energies to feed its acquisitive desires. Damming a river and exterminating a species have much in common: both erase evolutionary futures.

David Wallace, *The Klamath Knot*

HOMING

Lance M. Kinseth

To begin to grasp the landscape within and without, we need to be able to move past our ideas to our experiences. Our sojourn in one solar cycle is a courageous one in the way that it challenges our beliefs, and yet, it only brings us to a door. Once past the limits of our knowledge and even our senses, the real journey is about to begin. And with no beliefs to restrain us, the path is one joyous free flight. We come home to where we stand, to where the journey begins and ends. And to see the world, we go through the doorway opened by one thing. It might be a bird, a plant, a stone, or a river, or whatever is common to the local place.

In the view from this goat-hill prairie remnant, the senses take in so much diversity that the eye doesn't know where to begin. And yet, this goat-hill prairie overriding one precious ravine is just one small notch in the brim of a five-hundred mile long stream. Inside this notch there are nettles and willows and oak and elm. There are over-old cliffs, a waterfall and a stand of hickory, and even a rubbish heap with bits of fluttering rag and paper. Where to begin? All of this lean furniture is discarded, squeezed between fields of stubble, and stuck to one languid brown River. Looking into one warm leaf, we see River. We look at the hand. River streams across the back. This way that any event includes the other—this inseparability of process—says that all events lead home, which is to say, Forward. All becoming is homing.

We look out from this notch to the Streamvalley as it rolls and casts about, and as it falls and then ascends. Crows bark and dogs bay from its richly chorused shoulders. There are sugary thickets and one-tone clearings. A plodding settlement, a coal town, sits upstream from this goat-hill hollow. All around us there are feasts and there are booby-traps. One sun, meager by cosmic standards, blasts and dominates this chamber by day. And by night, this chamber is revealed to be woven to a thousand other suns. This valley is overrun with wealth, brimming with instinct enough to save what is life to us. This is diamond-rich melody stacked upon melody. There are just no empty bins. And it is so much more than it appears at first glance because its every action is Rivering.

From wherever we come there is this River of nature. And no matter where we journey, we keep this sense of from-where-we-come. No matter where we journey, we can always find some languid mouth, ever-streaming. It holds a particle of our local place. It is something to which we can come home. Whatever the turmoil or the distraction or the crisis, the quietness and effectiveness of River is always close by. No matter where we are, River is always present and setting off a trigger. Something magical is always happening. Far off bend on Suwannee or on Moingona's brim beneath this goat-hill, here is music in sound and color—the smell of algae and blackened leaf, silence then explosion, a drip and a storm. This is not just a doorway, but World itself, foaming, red at sunset, endless and successful, not afraid to stick its neck out.

* * *

> By the waters of life, by time, by time: the names of great mouths, the mighty maws, the vast, wet, coiling, never-glutted and unending snakes that drink the continent. Where, sons of men, and in what other land will you find others like them, and where can you match the mighty music of their names?—The Monongahela, the Colorado, the Rio Grande, the Columbia, the Tennessee, the Hudson (Sweet Thames!); the Kennebec, the Rappahannock, the Delaware, the Penobscot, the Wabash, the Chesapeake, the Swannanoa, the Indian River, the Niagara (Sweet Afton!); the Saint Lawrence, the Susquehanna, the Tombigbee, the Nantahala, the French Broad, the Chattahoochee, the Arizona, and the Potomac (Father Tiber!)—these are a few of their princely names, these are a few of their great, proud, glittering names, fit for the immense and lonely land that they inhabit.
>
> Thomas Wolfe, *Of Time and the River*

Wherever we find ourselves there is River. There are awesome rivers, of course, and there are little rivers, rivulets, streams, creeks and canals. There are lines streaming across boulders and down inside hairline fissures. River is streaming under seemingly solid ice and soil, through every part of the day and night, through a summergreen forest and then through a city, and right through the middle of the ocean, through all of that water that is more than water. And right now, wherever we sit, river streams through the strata beneath us. There is a Rivering—a weaving and streaming of sorts in every appearance. There is a continual coming to and leaving of form, right next to us and even inside of us.

Rivering is so much more than water. Forever going down the drain, River affords a view of the world from a different angle. The undersides of trees and bridges are the obvious revelations in its mirrored surface—the everyday home-cooked meals that any river serves up effortlessly. Yet River runs so much deeper than this. It is one cold soup that gives and takes, and one that is woven to everything everywhere. Even River that is rolling through a city gets taken inside of the events that occur in that local place, no matter how hard-edged the landscape may suddenly become. And it is especially in this mixing of both imagery and real activity that River approaches the essence of the world. Rivering turns the most hard-edged landscape into a fluid event. Its surface is a crack between worlds, between the grounded appearances and the ethereal activity. And no matter how narrow this streaming gets, it remains broad enough to tie reason and intuition together. Rivering can open a watershed way of perception, especially opening those fluid events that are beyond us, especially showing that the impenetrable solidly exists.

Because a prairie is an area of high stream frequency, the focus upon Rivering is an easy door, with numerous streams that are all rich in personality and full of contrast. River is joining, *riveting*, merging parts so solidly together. Estuary is joined to marsh to creek and this creek to sky and River again and again. At the same time, River *rives*, splitting one valleyside from the other as well as dissolving sediment. This great contrast or paradox assures that just when we begin to sense River as one thing, there is always a sense that this process of Rivering contains more than we suspect. A foot may tell us what our reason won't. Our chosen path might be a mirage. There can be a deep hole in the next step. The ice collapses. The body stands to get lost, to get woven in some unintended way to the world.

The biosphere's rivers comprise only one ten-thousandth of the planet's available water. And yet, this is no little event, with 3.25 million miles of rivers in the United States alone. In just one obscure waterway, there are so many perceptual drinks. The river below this goat-hill vista may be one very obscure waterbody in the cosmos and yet it contains as many aspects as a cosmos. Strong-Back, Strong-Arm, Withering Finger, Wild Glint in the Eye, Dancing Light: these are all aspects of River. Half-circling, elbowing in one place, then straight-running or reaching in another, this too is River. It has no single name or single dance. It is the China-Breaker and the Naked Throat. And in any one obscure waterway, and in any square inch of its volume, there are particles of all seas and the well-sung bodies of all rivers. Here is the holy cow's mouth—Gaumukh, the Ganges' source, the waltzing Danube, the Sumida, the Yukon, the Ob, the Yenisey, the Congo, the Nile, the great Amazon, the Parana, the Mackenzie, the Lena, and the Godavari. There are so many drinks in this one drink—murky, muscular at times, even torrential and bloody, or suddenly serene and deeply crystalline.

When we try to imagine World without River, we are left standing on a harsh dusty landscape. River is one place that is really doing something without trying to do anything. It is common and not eccentric. We can learn something from the common, from all of its overlooked aspects. For all its obscurity, River, like any other niche in the biosphere, is capable of startling us all. This event is cut-throat, a defender of the faith, passive and silent at one time then raucous and outraged at another. River as we know it today was in place before the beginning of the century. And it was solidly here in slightly different form before that. It constantly cuts a new figure. We could spend a lifetime in the bend of one obscure River, sensing the daily changes in the configurations of stones in one obscure point. Toiling, this River is farmer and soldier at the bottom of this goat-hill. Sweet, it is a rubbing hand at the belly. Snaking, it works between the hips. Man-woman, unmanly, unfeminine, emasculated, never human; something so familiar, something so different; open, a tongueless mouth, unheard from, invisible, alone—this is River, one little thread that is a thread woven to the world and at the same time the edge of a wave.

When we drop into one summergreen rivervalley, we drop inside one very thin line, one private place. By comparison, a mountain valley seems so public. And what we are likely to see in a rivervalley is correspondingly different from the mountain valley. This landscape opens small, deep images. It is not overwhelming and it probably won't kill us. It is a pleasant way into the world. At first glance, some effort seems to be required to get beyond the commonplace. A plains rivervalley can appear disregarded, looking somewhat like refuse next to the ordered lines of fields and roads. But we can spend one very rich time inside of those cracks and tears, letting small events be woven into ourselves. We drop inside these lines named rivervalley and we drop still further into small fissures that begin to expand into the infinity of smallness. We can get in very gradually and very safely and because we feel so secure, we can stay in rather long and sojourn rather deeply.

Around one bend, arums—arrowheads—root at the edge of a water canyon, a deep bowl in this river. This deep pool is a plump belly, trailing a long tunic well downstream. There is a deep center that we cannot penetrate with an eye. All of this basin, this center and its rooted brim, is Soup in a Bowl. Here is a stew of water and our stewing minds set beside it. We look to this bowl. We see a piece of meat and a noodle every once in a while. And we know that almost every piece of this Soup has been taken apart, dissected, magnified, dissolved, assayed and burnt. And still, this Soup is virtually unknown. What keeps this stew together and in the forefront of change is beyond us. Even the most predominant element, water, is not really understood. And this stew, River, is so much more than water, so much more than condensed rain. It is a *stewing* in the deepest sense of that word, full of the leachings and birthings of the world itself.

Here is Soup alive, a settling broth; each animal a rump; each leaf a seasoning; fish, a longship of meat; a strand of moss, a noodle. Soup alive: on top—bubbling oxygen and iron oxide form a blue-green film; underneath—soup of mouths and watery eyes, soup of children and baby carriers and old sentient beings. Soup of unliving: disassembling and reassembling, boiling, simmering, blending, icing. This is a broth with muscle, a Soup of every possibility—thick and thin, hot and icy cold. Biological Soup and chlorinated hydrocarbons, mercury, cadmium, acids, detergents, waste oil, arsenic and selenium compounds, carbamate insecticides, sewage—traces of as many as 900 basic chemicals. Sediment, lowering the landform one foot every thirty thousand years.

Around one bend come ten thousand shoes and there are another ten thousand shoes right behind the first. Looking just downstream, there are the heels of ten thousand already past. And with this sojourn continuing for centuries, it is difficult to comprehend why this stream is only two feet deep. This Soup treads lightly for all of its weight, streaming forward, not pressing down and attempting to stop. This is no forced march either, with nothing being done in rote or purposive unison. Some shoes slow almost to a stop in a still pool. Some are joined with new drippings out of Hill. Some go up near the surface while others go down, seeping through a foot of sand to claybed, and pushing deeper to rockbed, molecule by molecule. Some shoes run fast for a time in straight reaches. They go so fast that they lose control, tripping on branches and stones or colliding with each other at a turn in River. And some of these shoes fly out of the river body, going into the atmosphere. All of this nimble movement and soupy variety reveal River to be a complex event.

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> Sunrise: hidden by pines and cedars to the east: I saw the red flame of the kingly sun glaring through the black trees, not like dawn but like a forest fire.
>
> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

Nuclear fusion energy missiles over the hill. The eye is struck by needle-thin strips of light. This is dawn. A bomb has gone off nearly one-hundred million miles away and a bit of it is ramming into this streamvalley. We always forget. We never subsume it. We are always expecting First Light to be a dim light, dusty and cobwebbed like a bulb burning off in a cellar. But First Light is a blasting light. It seems to crack the dark where it enters, radiating out like splintered glass around a bullethole. This is a light that we cannot even look at.

For all of its association with a bomb, this light doesn't stir up the burning indignation one might expect. Rather, Dawn is a warming fire, thawing out the damp, the chill, the creaking joints. It is life to us. It seems to shatter into a thousand pieces on River, with particles skipping across the top then melting in. True, sun comes harsh as a hammer through a door, but it gets welcomed inside every day. What a thing it is to wake up every morning to a fusion bomb that the biosphere waits for and depends upon! It is only astonishing if we think of life as biological and separate. However, we are coming to find that we live in paradise—specifically inside the outer atmosphere of the sun that is lost, in turn, within a galaxy.

It is amazing that the "inanimate" sun is always so woke up, going full blast right out of bed. It thrusts a finger through the hair and it will come through the smallest crack in the door. It can be personified, given a finger to thrust with or put to bed at dusk, but Sun is indifferent, so immense and yet able to squeeze magically inside a hairline fissure and become biota. It is too much for an eye and it is strong enough to gag Wood and dry River. We know this for a fact. We are always finding the bones of Old River in stone and infant River in mud, drying and cracking in late summer.

This fission bomb is so precious. Dawn makes River into a pot of gold. Gray bark turns gold for an instant. We should have enough sensitivity to recognize that the sun-wisdom is trying to give us a glimpse of the preciousness of the world in color terms (e.g., gold) that we can understand. Everything is turning to gold at dawn, uncorroding, unblemished and bold. The sky has become a dome of gold. There is gilt everywhere: gold on water and meadow, aurum rays straight as arrows leaning up against
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trees in Wood. Gold has cut through the shroud of Night. For a moment, World at Dawn is heavy and dense, glittering and weighty. Here is alchemy, a gold stone for contemplating that easily outweighs the metal itself.

In the very earliest moment of Dawn, in the most miniscule part of that moment, the overwhelming ambience of the streamvalley is one of smoke. Atomized, vaporous, World appears near creation, before any condensation to form. And again, the wisdom of the world speaks to us of continuous creation in imagery we can comprehend to wake us to the creation of the moment. World hangs for a moment on the brink of darkness. And it seems that only a moist scent keeps it from nothingness. In this local place—this streamvalley, there is of course "Fish" scent. Fish smells as strong as a word. There is probably star smell if a nose could read it, but at least for our species, the variety of nasal messages are as weak as a long-burnt idea. In this moment just before First Light, we can wonder about faraway images such as the smell of a star. But in another moment, World will burst into the optical nerve endings and we will fall far behind in our struggle to keep pace with the messages that are storming in. For at the very moment of Dawn, World congeals fast as a crystal on a string and rises into form in the cool morning sky.

Just before Dawn, Sky and River have appeared to be fused. River overperks, spilling out over the rim of the valleyfloor and rises into the fields. Everything in Fog, even the autumn dryness, is moistened by it and takes on the appearance of freshness or new birth. Fog is River going up into the rafters. And when it occurs, dust in the throat no longer feels like dust in the throat. Our breath is revealed to be vaporous, forming small currents and eddies before the eye. And in our thinking, it seems as though Fish might pull up next to us as if we were boulders in midstream.

Even though the eye is dulled by it, Fog can open up World to us. It is comforting, steaming like a slow-brewing kettle. It feels and smells like River and it is supportive in the way that it feels skin-tight, riveted to us. Fog opens a new stream of thought. Tree vanishes then reappears. And in our perception, this tree is taken apart for a second and then reassembled. Molecules come to mind in this diffusion, in seeing World disassemble. This haze gives a particular sense of clarity, in revealing a literal connectiveness between "objects" in the activity of space that our eye had sensed as emptiness.

Morning Star dissipates Fog but in a remarkably silent way. The way in which the visual world suddenly snaps together makes us feel as though we ought to wake up to a sharp crack. Suddenly, the grasses are fixed where they were yesterday and the "objects" seem to put a vise and clamp on the ambiguity of night. If there is a sound to Dawn it is one bird. And then this sets off another, and it is these birds that dissolve the mountain of silence. Their eyes peer at the Sun as it cracks the brim of the horizon and peers into Wood at a stiff angle. A path, narrow yet well-worn, collects small pools of light. One side is spattered with light; the other seems to rot in darkness. The birds make a music to fit this kind of world, chirping in small bits and pieces, as if the notes were clipped with fine scissors. It could have been a blast but it is nowhere as harsh as a revelry.

This dance of light and shadow produce the patterns of paradise as the sun gradually inches into the sky. And this waterless Star sets off the plumbing along this path with each ascending step. Here comes a river of water *up* through the capillaries of Plant at the rate of an inch per second. Millions of plants respond, each according to its relationship to Sun. Each plant is braiding itself to Sky and to Sun. And paradoxically, like the veil of Fog, the ascent of Sun begins to reveal the inseparability of one event from another as we begin to observe the activity of the new day. Walking for years through the local place, we have seen the object. But now, as we stay with the object rather than physically move about, we begin to see its activity, and the journey is a deeper one.

. . . every cubic inch of space is a miracle.

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

Throughout the ascent of morning, River is a chameleon—rose then amber, then rapidly catching up with the sky that is high-white. Focus closer and closer upon River: waterstriders skate upstream against the current, treading on cloud, bird, the images of overhanging branch and stem, and butterflies and leaves and small flies. Every square inch of the surface is changing. In every minute spot of River, light is flying and tumbling like a swallow, going over foam, bubble half-domes, shell and seed particles, minute gnats and leaf detritis. All morning, this light shivers, wriggles and scatters. Shapes stretch grotesquely, break up and reform again. Stress lines in the current stay firm, playing out from a boulder in midstream. All of this light and movement is an excellent dinner for the eye. It sees fresh new possibilities in this highway, in this fish house, in this refuse dump, in this body with long green hair, in this plough, in this liquid foot, and in this condensed rain. This one square inch is one bursting egg, with a thousand new images and ideas pouring forth.

One square inch of New-Found River: it holds perhaps a part of a dead man and a mad dog and a particle of silk. It is not simply chemistry or biology in any traditional sense. Gnats are tapping at the lid of every square inch, picking at the dead. Jumping into the air in one place, they have to chase this moving tomb downstream. This one square inch of surface River is going by at perhaps two feet per second. It runs up against a rock, spins sideways, and spirals off to the left and out into the mainstream. Imbedded in the surface of this one square inch, bubbles of foamy protein—complex magical molecules rubbed off some biota somewhere are being tossed out of the Soup.

Underneath one square inch, nothing stands still. Free-floating algae, plankton, diatoms and detritis rise and sink and rise again, roller-coastering downstream. And when Square goes over a deep hole, the bottom drops out, nearly knocking Square out of existence. Square keeps a trace of its originality, but parts of other Squares merge to form a new combination. Despite this near disappearance, nothing is lost. Square is always finding fit with River. And for us, Square opens up and fits against us beyond our expectations. Everything in it is alchemy, showing in one small space and in one brief instant how the World is a stream in its essence. Square is an alchemy, always so magically enchanting in the way that it bends our perception in our attempt to keep up with it, and there is one square inch of River after another into which we can turn, time after time.

The Small of World are swept around and swirled into every crack and fissure, touching everything sooner or later. So are the Large, which are always minute if the field of view is large enough. There is always a tiny sound, a minute cry, a miniature laugh and a particulate sigh waiting to be heard, but often never noticed. And looking out across this rivervalley, every leaf edge, every underside and underbelly is stuffed to the gills with drama. World is jam-packed, and transfigured by the small and built from it. A small log is an immense highway for ants. And the interior of each ant is another path. Down, descending into the Small, opens an abyss. Here is a galaxy, with just its minor brim sticking out in the sunlight of this morning. So that in descent into one square inch, we stand to ascend and outleap River and the sea.

The Small of World can show us the way in which nothing is simply one event. River is full of small Worlds. There are sections, quartersections, acreages and small lots that all bring a good price for the stewing mind that finds them. Each space is distinguished by a different play of light and color that might range from green or oily black-green to mud to bright-white. The surface of each lot has the undulations and flow of draped muscle. All of this streamvalley and as far out from it as we would wish to go, from earth core to star and beyond, is in motion, streaming, and essentially River of diversity.

It can take one stewing perception, one that bends and elbows, to find this depth in World. That is what makes River such a match. River is backwoods and off-road, and although it seems to be a long journey, it is a shortcut. Our traditional road is no shortcut. Where roads begin to twist or bend or descend or ascend is where we want to get off and really begin to travel. We look for what it is that pulls these roads down or what it is that bends them. Such a twist or elbow is a trigger that cues us to the real work of the world. Roads are strewn with ups and downs, bent and twisted. They can rock us like a storm as they sidestep and try to go around a bubbling cauldron of energy. Backroads are at best dowsers. And where they turn or descend is where we want to get off, so as not to stay like a dog tied to a leash. By this long-cutting, we find a short-cut to World. We run into the World rather than pass or cut through it. And we quickly run into Smallness, which then leads us into a galaxy of process. We do not have to push to find the World. We take the road until it turns, leave it and we abruptly come face-to-face with it, and it is a stream of energy.

In one square inch of River, there is a big expanse of Sky. We are there too, looking up at ourselves. We see a large range of Sky and we see ourselves in this Square. We are next to a feather. All of this Sky is packed into one square inch of River and this one square inch is packed, in turn, into one very small hole in the eye. And moment by moment, some of the most paradoxical images are likely to be found there. Just now there is a waterstrider skating in a cloud.

Ascending out of one square inch, the local place can continue to open upon a fluid world of interwoven events. Right in the midst of a galaxy of square inches in River, there are large stones in midstream. Standing up against this stream day after day, they conjure up a strong sense of power, being like a feudal castle that is able to bend River around it, or like a death head or the back of some large rooting beast. Yet for all their weight and size, they are not enough to strangle the throat. For all of their size, they just make River appear tooth-gapped. Just now a dragonfly approaches one stone. The image of a castle dissolves to a conning tower. When we want to name it and ask, "What is it?", we really need to ask, "What isn't it?" Every event in the local place, whether it is one square inch or some object within our sense of scale, each event is a stream of imagery. In the ascent of the day, when the eye seems to be showing us the real world, we need to remember the biases of the eye and the wisdom of the Fog.

> Rivers have quiet beginnings—the whisper of snowflakes on tree boughs, the murmur of raindrops on leaves, the drop of moisture onto forest floors, the trickle of tiny rivulets. With these sounds, a roaring wild river is born.
>
> Laurence Pringle, *Wild River*

With the coming of more light, biota get chary. Fish are shy. A large bird above River is circumspect. We are attentive, having been charged by Fog to look beyond appearances. Looking half-asleep, Fog is a wake-up. It restricted World to shards compared to the way in which World is now suddenly all there in mid-morning. And when Sun penetrates this streamvalley by midday, the World is so whitewashed as to be half-lost again. Midday becomes too bright for comfort, which means that it is too far beyond our control. Predator could be standing right in front of us or hung in the Sky above, unnoticed. It is what we do not see that can kill us. It is the lack of attending to the obvious rather than solving some mystery that is hidden from us that does it.

Plant nearly bursts in the increasing mid-morning light. Yet Plant has learned to moderate, how to lean away or go limp or play possum. It can put out a cold face if it has to. But by midday, all of this light will put one awesome pressure on Plant which is rooted. If the eye is looking for a bloody battlefield, the noon sky appears to be one with vapor spewing out all over this streamvalley. But the eye is being deceived if it finds a war. Plant has been hit by this bomb billions of times before. It wears a wooden carcass to bolster its "defenses." It has made itself into a Winner. It breaks off pieces of a star, and it turns this star into itself. For all of the power of Sun, this streamvalley is a Bowl of Plant. When we finally sense this cooperation, we marvel at the depth of our ignorance. It is sometimes incomprehensible to us to imagine how we have been able to overlook the connections. Plant is Star on earth and the holistic action is a River, a streaming.

Midday Sun is turbulent, raging, inflaming, vaporizing. World appears under attack. And we want to see it this way right after we have encountered its cooperation. The World may be blurred by bombflash and firestorm and cannonade at noon, but the World remains solidly present, and the better for the process. It rides out a firestorm and from it builds a solid tested foundation. Plant has taught the macromolecule how to live inside a firestorm and how to take advantage of it. Its first attempts were near failures, yet even the failures, dead and littering, have left a fortress of soil. And today, the battle has turned to a bout. Day is simply one more 10^5 second round.

Some middays are less than blistering. Sun may barely get an appearance in. Something happens in World that softens Sun. This event is Cloud. It is water piled up by the Sun waiting to go somewhere. A cloud is about the only way to get water out of the bottom sink, the ultimate drain, the sea. Yet in trying to manipulate water, Sun plays a trick on itself. When Sun rolls this freight-train energy of rain-bound clouds, they have enough force to slow a fission bomb. It again illustrates the way in which the Sun has become a cloud and, importantly, the fact that any event can contain more power than we imagine.

When a cloudy day turns to half-cloud, the sky above River goes from the appearance of a ceiling to one very deep sea. On a half-cloud day, we are likely to see swallows hunting along the sheer white untouchable cliffs. We can look straight up for miles and see for light-years at night. Because Sky and River contain aspects of each other, Sky is not empty but contains the diversity that we readily accept in River's Stew. When, for example, there does not appear to be a bird to be found in rich Wood, there always seems to be some bird in the sky. Again, it becomes most amazing to us as we approach River and Sky and Wood that we have been capable of dismissing the paradisical richness of any aspect of the World. In the murk of river's shoreline, we find the diamond precision of the diatoms, not just inactively there like some gemstone, but preciously alive and creating the World. And we can find this paradise every day and every moment of that day, with each aspect of the day spelling out the wise strategies and the overall structure of nature itself.

By late afternoon, one day on River is beginning to cool. It takes a very thin yet broad form. It is the shape of the terrain. Another almost imperceptible layer is forged and hammered into place. The terrain is becoming one very rich museum piece in the form of the detritis and new biomass of the day. It is distinguished by its wisdom in continuing to give itself away. We dig down a foot and we uncover a record of a century. Tonight's biota will burnish the rough sculpture, making themselves in the process. The daycast has formed a fine terrine that holds the Soup, River. Here is one marvel that contains a marvel. Here is fine tea in a very fine bowl.

> Your wood at sunset. The living silence, in which the day's pressure on the senses loosens. The sun bends toward the horizon, making shadows of trees and bushes, shadows that slowly wander over soft moss and the undulating line of the stones. A moment when you can imagine finding the reality of life itself in the gliding changes of the forms.
>
> Oh yes, there is of course a quiet sadness in the knowledge that you will soon be taken away from all this. But greater still is the joy, equally humble and wonder-struck, that for a moment this bit of cosmic substance got its chance to glimmer as mind in the great drama.
>
> Rolf Edburg, *At the Foot of the Tree*

Near River, something magical is always about to begin. At dusk, a Half-Burnt Furnace shuts down for the day in every local place. A kiln mouth opens, and a bullion pours cleanly. Day is cast, lustering and crazed, congealing now into history. Just one spark drops and that spark climbs upstream. Startled, Heron jumps out of the path of this red-hot slag. This bird seems to sense that it has saved its beard of slender feathers. When Heron moves, we are moved. A Bell Rope is tripped. Here is something more than appearances, one rose-colored molten alchemy named Setting-Sun-Over-River.

Half-burnt Sun and color on River sink out of sight. The colors of the summergreen forest seem to go the same way. Shapes wither and thin out. Yet even in ink, the world holds onto a lively gray. Everything is staying massful and vigorously ordered, right down to the molecule, so that here, in the evening, there is always a sense of the familiar, something remembered. But the eye is getting lost and something profoundly different rises out of the bones of the day. First there is a murmur, a humming that becomes thickly feathered in the cooling evening air. Smooth, gliding hawkish, there is a dance of sound where there once was color. And in this music there is a remembrance of all bells and their lifting, of the way that they crack and shatter air, and something to be remembered for the morrow: the way that they seem to polish light.

We go deep below the comforting roof of Leaf, this day factory that is shut down now, cooling in the night. Well-known Star, moving at one-half billion miles per hour, appears fixed solidly in front of us. River appears the same, even as it meanders by. Half-Burnt Spark and Heron of this evening have melted to Star and River. All of these comforting anchors can strike us with a stunning wallop, and yet we seem to enjoy the way that the mask we make of them enhances our importance. We remain rude in a place we have been taught to sense as artless.

But if we will go with River, in a watershed way, streaming, we fall inside Creation itself, and it is an ocean. It is a sojourn that at first can appear too improbable and too far spoken. The voice of River is seldom heard and, when heard, half-heard at best. It is not something made of words or even comfortable with words. However, it is solidly present and in such fine tune.

Rivering in all of the events of a local place is an alchemy. It is a bell. It can knock us to our senses, opening awareness of a tapestry that is weaving around us and through us. With consciousness of it, we can soften. We can journey to a place that is far spoken, beyond us all, and yet right next to us and within us. Rivering is something with which to keep pace, some way to comprehend the courteous common ground between a wasp, sapiens, a lichen, a moon, a wave and a molecule. Rivering is too fluid a process to produce a clear, fixed set of answers. One moment the world might appear clearly savage and then as suddenly change, looking like a shivering lost dog. The world is ever-changing, rivering, full of channels and eddies and very still waters, a place of activity more than object as its essence, a terrain of open possibility.

River is a Signpost with so many messages written within it as to be indecipherable. Here is Book that we truly want to read. Here is Change in the way surroundings are perceived. Something is knocked loose by the bellsound. A crust is chiseled off in one place, revealing more than appearances. Here is a way of perceiving that is no more or no less important than any other, simply strong and so deep as to be enchanting. And it is that enchantment that leads us to sense more. There is no secret, no machine to be taken apart.

Rivering is not a book of facts. Rather, it is a strategy that relies on observations and commentaries. It is a Pilgrim's Ship. It is not mystical and inaccessible, but rather banging at the senses trying to get inside of our perception. Beckoning, here is always scintillant Plant, always this Priest of Vines, wrapped in an embroidery of Leaf, crawling in a Wormy Way, tendril-tongued and rooty finger-tipped. There, River is streaming under bark and round some stone in the soil and out to Star and eventually crumbling into the timelessness of dust.

In the dark, all of these judgeless events—Priest in all its greenery, Star, River—they are likely to become associated with the judgeful image of red bone-and-claw nature that we all have learned to see. This amoral world seems capable of breaking us apart, wounding, even capable of swift bloody massacre. There are delusions of voices in the night greenery, just behind the ear, that seem full of terror and make the next step seem likely to be booby-trapped. We want to cage the Priest at first. We keep looking for the Watcher or for the knife in the back, the viper's strike, a beast at the throat, or a dozen powerful henchmen.

Just as suddenly, when the senses tire of upholding this fear of the dark, we can feel the opposite of terror. We drop our guard. Too peaceful a place, Garden, emerges. It appears to be a place solely in our service, timeless, quiet, undisturbing and unchallenging. Over time we come to some balance. We see that we are the Watchers and not the center of attention. We begin to become capable of becoming finely tuned. We touch an event and we begin to be capable of finding the Wave in just about everything including ourselves. We set a rude table and we put our ear to the ground. We move our house around and even begin to take down the walls.

With this balancing, an enchanting paradise opens up. Here is solid River and Wood, tucked and pleated, cobwebbed, intent, waved and lacy, roaring, delicately crashing and pushing up again. And inside Wood beneath this goat-hill, there is Fern, grounded and feathered, a dance if we use words, and an accompaniment perhaps if we do not. Here is Maidenhair and here is Wood, an event within an event, a place that will alter any thought that approaches it.

Color has stretched steel-wire thin to a salmon-tinged line on the horizon that was taut beyond belief. It snaps and is gone for the night. Light has gone from a wheel by day to a wire above the terracing by evening. Then a switch is thrown and everything seems to grind to a halt. The plumbing almost stops in Plant. Yet Wood is full of energy, full of self-designed aqueducts, streamlets and tricklings in the soil. This immense weaving of water seeps its way down to River, dropping sand grains one by one down the hillside as if Hill were an intricate hourglass.

Above all of this land water, atmosphere is streaming, weaving an intricate design in amongst leaf and stem. Below all of this air, below Wood, River lies central, like the most consciously intended city. It has chosen a route right through the center of everything. It is a symbol for centering. River cannot be said to stop at bankside, for bankside drips River that is falling off Hill, and it is inside of the sky Fog too.

The fortunes of biota in Wood and River seesaw through the night. Bird in crow form, some twenty years old, is clearly etched against the gnarled treetop. Claw is meeting claw-like branch. Below it, Mouse is foraging. In the distance, Owl listens. Below River, Nymph casts a silk net, hoping to make a profit in the night. In this hunting, World appears brutal. Yet River is kindness itself. It is wealthy and it is generous with its wealth. And like the River, the biota surrounding it give their precious wealth back to World body. The River is everyone's landscape. Washing away trails in sand and mud, River leaves no traces of ownership to delude anyone.

In this dark night, the eye takes a backseat. River comes wafting in on a nostril. Molecules dissipate from it, draining off Fish and Mollusk, off rotting Plant and City Refuse, and off the leachings of Meadow. Sound joins this dank smell pulsing by, wave after wave all night long. Dogs bay all night up River. In this saturated night atmosphere, River has come up well over the brim, and the nose detects it. A midnight moon turns every surface to silver. The concept of silver is perhaps too common a description for the spilt look of moonlight on form. There is a faint voice accompanying this light. Perhaps it is the hum of foraging midges which are angels in their own right.

In the deepest part of the night, an eye can still go out light-years to a star cluster. But for the most part, open eyes hang like dead idols in a reliquary. We listen to River and to the holes that insects make in this ink. The insect breaks down the night, not afraid to touch anything—singing, smelling and probing. One suddenly hits the face and there are others probing for blood at the wrist. And the insect sound direction becomes difficult to pinpoint: Is it behind us or in front of us? And like the weaving of insect activity, the trees appear to have come together and our perception is one of being inside of the landscape rather than looking out to it. Wind from Hill, Moonlight, River streaming, Star, and Cricket are all woven into a symphony and we are perched inside of it, sending out EKG and EEG melodies and chords beyond our perception. Soon, we will be lost to sleep, beaten by the Black Sun, showing us once again that we are not in control of even the night.

In the very deep night, in the slow side waters of River, we might encounter a phosphorescence. We come round a bend and there is a sheet of light on River. It is half-Moon and half-botanical presence. We sit down before this dance which stretches out for some distance and has the afterglow of a dying fire. In finding this late night cool fire, we have likely already seen enough of nature to find the fire inside of every local place. Unseen by most, this great event that is lost in a million streams is icing on the cake. World is showing us one more time how fire is so much more than we imagine.

In the black night Riverwood, there is not a green sign of life. Bird, in a score of different plumages, is perched and anchored. In the day past, Bird had cut this one streamvalley into a thousand domains and borderlines and will likely do the same tomorrow. But in the night, Bird has closed its eyes and chatters dreamingly. In the night, it will make no life and death decisions. It will store the wolf in its mouth for the daylight. We glance up above the birds and sense the trees to be woven together. Moonlight dances off the branches in gulps and scatters inside an eye. And this light colors a deep wilderness and bathes both city and Riverwood. We find the World to be inseparable and ourselves finally home, immersed in it and not having to go anywhere.

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> "The whole universe is a complex of rhythms," mused Amanda. "We each of us feel a need to identify our bodily rhythms with those of the cosmos. The sea is the grand agency of rhythm. The grain-tops in the wind, the atoms in orbit are rythmic. The uterus, which is a strong muscular organ, contracts with the birth of the baby—the rhythmic contractions, in fact, are the important motivations for the baby to emerge into the world. Rhythm is how it all begins."
>
> Tom Robbins, *Another Roadside Attraction*

Both River and Sun appear remarkably restrained for all of their weight. Knowing something of the process of both grand events, we are aware that the Sun is capable of evaporating the earth and will likely do so in our distant future and the River is capable of carrying away a mountain and has demonstrated this capacity repeatedly in the past. The very silence of one day in this streamvalley speaks to the power that overrides appearances and makes the music of appearances. And the closer we look, the more we discover the essence of the World to be more a rhythm or a process or an activity than a solid structure. For every event we find to finally "explain the world," there is a counter-balance or a paradox, which looks like an opposite or minimally something quite separate, and yet it is an aspect of the other. Bird and Dog, for example, are two musical events of River, in just the sounds that they produce. Bird is perhaps best known to us as Song because it takes the dayshift. Dog has taken the night. Bird along this River will rise to a crescendo by midday, but Dog never does. By noon, Riverdog has pooled up inside itself. Bird chants with the clipped energy that sounds more like the Sun than River. Dog seems to be an instrument made of thick bone. It is not a reed flute by any means. It seldom speaks and is more likely to use its beak to lay a scent of conversation. But by midnight, Dog is likely to sound along River, banging against a mountainous black wall full of scent. If we live by a River, the song of one thick bony horn baying downriver is one of the most dependable musics of River.

This Dog-by-River is a symbol of sapiens' link to River, as an inseparable aspect of its rhythm. We have accompanied River and we have led Dog to it. Lakes are rather short-lived compared to River, and Fish would have died if not for River. Similarly, sapiens flourished on the alluvial plain. And wherever we have wandered, River has been a compass and carrier and supporter of settlements. It has always been a dependable route home. We know, for example, that a rivulet can lead to River. The water route is reading like a roadmap. And it is likely precise in a way that is beyond us. The salmon, for example, seem to be saying that each River even has its own taste.

Here is River, home, from-where-we-come. And each local River is looking like nature itself, a streaming oecology. What looks like water is a fire of energy in the cosmos. We begin to listen for something more than water that is wearing watery clothing. We might hear the wrinkles in River, and they are sounding cranky and bent. We stay with them and they seem to carve themselves into flowers and wing. When the wind wrinkles River, there is one Sun, one yellow coal, reflected in every ripple. Beholding River, this event has turned one Sun into ten-thousand Suns. Watching this Sunshow, we are likely to miss something equally as stunning and yet perhaps not as stunning to the eye. It might be a cluster of delicate flies or something even more obscure because of our hierarchy of values. And so River begins to teach not to try to see at all. We try to not "look-at," not undress. We behold. And we find a diverse process in River that touches everything, that is nature itself, and we find ourselves there and begin to sense components of a strategy for habitation within this process, flowing with instead of pushing the River.

For all of the power of the Sunshow on River, an event, Heron, saunters by in slow-motion flight and puts an end to ripple-watching and sunshows. How can energy stream into such a graceful two-pound form? We fly with it for a time and we appear to be lost again in the dazzle of appearances. But we are beginning to look twice at the World, and there in Heron we find the stream of nature. It is one that is connected unbroken to ourselves. We begin to encounter ourselves and we are home.

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> The life in us is like the water in the river. It may rise this year higher than man has ever known it, and flood the parched uplands. . . . such is the character of that morrow which mere lapse of time can never make to dawn. The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.
>
> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

We have imagined River out there at hillbase to be so unwishing. And against all of our desires, it has been so easy to waste this place and throw it away. At first it appears so inanimate and dull. Yet when time is spent near River, it begins to appear intricate and alive and inseparable. River is an artery nurturing us, and we are an aspect of it. We breathe and a new channel briefly opens in the world. A stream passes over bloody, rivery lips, then is dry on the teeth, and finally lost down a warming tube. This streaming at hillbase and within us never ceases, never abandons, and can be religiously depended upon day in and day out, night after night.

We sit "sheltered" within the four walls of a cottage in the city or in the country, but our real house is the world itself, which ultimately sustains us. Perched on a log over River, wildness hangs over wilderness itself. River is rolling, folding in upon itself like a whorled flowerhead. Here are the folds of a paradise beyond anything we could imagine, full of the unexpected. Whorled River House has antlered walls of willow and cottonwood. In summer evenings, katydids form a tin wall of sound beyond the trees. In winter, a *CAW, Caw, caw, caaw* trails off downstream like a prayerwheel. Is this house or cathedral or both? It seems to be arching into the sky along its brim but it also appeared rooted and grounded like a kiva. It is a living place that tells its rhythmic tales, turning each page with a precision beyond us, a sandgrain at a time and in no hurry. We are there inside of that tale, perhaps for a brief flash of geo-time or perhaps as the vanguard of new opportunity and stability.

We keep attempting to sit down by this local stream and by the grand stream of nature as well and to take from it something that we can bring home to culture. And yet, this local stream and the grand stream of nature is our home and we do not take it anywhere. We need to get with the essence of nature to sustain in the long run. Although the local place may wear many faces over geo-time, it is "preserved" or remains in touch with the changing conditions because it is a stream. We want to think that we have surpassed nature and especially this local place which appears to be clearly subject to our domination. But when we cast a stone into this stew, we have no idea of what we have done (and we do much more than simply cast a stone). Has World been reordered or is it essentially the same? If changes are to be made, we can confidently put more faith in the World which knows how to make a steep vertical cliff and a flat riverbottom and how to fit a protozoan inside a mosquito when we wouldn't begin to consider it. Take one fish from river and the conditions for all fishes change as territories change and so perhaps bring increases in body size for some individuals. Pull one "weed" and the conditions for nearby plants change, spreading out like water ripples in an invisible but resonating deep chord. Evaporation can take a world of microörganisms and a rodent can take a grass plant and a larger fish a smaller one. The point to be made is that while each of these actions is obscure, we can act with awareness that any action, no matter how obscure or minute, ultimately affects the whole. Commonplace pigweed, growing in the crack in the sidewalk or perhaps the rare grass growing in tropical forest may save us all. Would we recognize a messiah? Perhaps it is something very different from what we think it *should* be. The obscure events may be sensei, complete as they stand, acting masterfully without having to know the whole structure, digesting enzymes, for example, or seeing with bipolar color vision as we do. □
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Dreaming of Grandpa

Walter Sanders

Robert hadn't seen his grandfather for twenty-five years. Well, of course he had looked through family albums trying to find all the photographs of grandpa that he could. Who wouldn't! And what delight when he came across a Kodachrome print all blue with age of his elegant grandfather holding little Robert on his knee. Robert had never seen his grandfather when he wasn't dressed in matching trousers, coat and vest, summer and winter. Sure, he would sometimes remove his jacket on a warm summer afternoon, and when he did, Robert loved to see the elastic bands, like arm garters, which allowed grandpa to pull up his shirt cuffs to keep them clean. And sure enough, there in the photograph, just as in real life, Grandpa's watch was tucked safely inside the lower right vest pocket and fastened, for extra safety, by a thin chain through a button hole on the vest. Now the watch was Robert's. It still had the same Roman numerals to tell the hours and minutes, and then to Robert's delight it had Arabic numerals for the second hand. Grandpa was the first person to show Robert that there was a correspondence between the *X* and the *10*. They had worked their way through all the hours of the day and the minutes and seconds of every hour.

"I can tell time in two languages," Robert told his teacher that first day.

Robert was sure that there had been at least twenty-five years since he and Grandpa had last seen one another. And that had been just a terrible time. Now, what a pleasant surprise. Here Dad had brought Grandpa by for a visit. Everybody, Emily, Mother, but mostly Robert himself, was surprised. Nobody expected a visit in the summer, in Pennsylvania at that, after all that time, from Grandpa. But there he was sitting in the back of what looked to Robert like a new light blue Fairmont station wagon.

Robert's mother agreed, that indeed, that was her father, Robert's grandfather.

"Who else did you think it was?" she said. Then she added, "He always had such good hair."

Maybe she was looking at some photograph of her father in her mind or maybe it was a memory of when she sat on his knee just as Robert had years later. Robert's mother said again, "Not a gray hair on his head until he was eighty-three."

Robert never knew, or couldn't remember, whether his mother was a redhead as her mother had been or whether her hair had always been tinted. But she had told him, time and again, that her hair was always naturally curly. And there was a shoebox full of her hair which Robert had once seen in the attic. "I had naturally curly hair," his mother had said as she held forth, like a gift that Robert was afraid to look at, the box which was filled with a thick hank of fine, wavy red hair. It had been a hot day and was even hotter in the attic as Robert and his mother spent hours that afternoon rearranging boxes of old things. He had wanted to touch the hair but had not. She had urged him to. And he hadn't been able to explain his hesitancy. But it was his mother's youth, something only to be looked at, something before his time. He could only look at that hair, like a museum piece. She had laughed at him in the heat of the attic. He felt like he was going to pass out.

"It's not really dyed, it's just tinted," his mother would say.

"Do you like the color? Or do you think it's too light? I think it's just right for summer," she would say all that summer during her visit. She liked to ask and answer her own questions. And sometimes when Robert agreed with her right answer, she would say, "Do you really think so?" or maybe it was, "Do you really think so!"

"And see," Robert's mother said, "Grandpa, I mean Dad, still has his own head of hair. Imagine after all these years. He was always such a handsome man."

As far as Robert could tell, Grandpa still sat in the back of the Fairmont station wagon, way back, and he hadn't moved a muscle. Robert thought there must be three rows of seats in the car. But he wasn't sure that they made them that way anymore. Anyway, Grandpa didn't move, and it just didn't seem as if he was about to get out. It was nice to see him again, Robert knew.

Dad had just brought Grandpa by while they were out riding. It was a nice warm day with a sky so clear you could see forever. It was one of those days that you just had to breathe in. And that's what Emily and Robert and his mother had been doing, breathing in the day and standing around in the side garden watching things grow.

As glad as everyone was to see the unexpected company, no one, not Emily, nor Robert, nor his mother knew what to do with the guests. And besides, Emily hadn't met Grandpa, and so Robert thought that it would be a good idea to introduce his wife to his Grandpa. Robert knew that his dad knew her and thought that she was just what he needed, a good wife.

For a while they just stood there in the fine afternoon light. Robert didn't smoke anymore. He had even given up his pipe more than a year ago. But he would have lit up at a time like this. It was hard to know what to do. There should be more milling around, Robert thought. Emily was okay. She seemed to be dancing or skipping over the flagstones, and his mother was touching up her hair. She did that with two quick touches of her fingertips to the hair at the temples. While she did that she turned her head to a quarter profile as if to hide her grooming.

Dryden didn't even look up as he lay in the sun, his legs twitching the action of his dog dreams.

Robert's mother worked at her hair some more, and Emily quit drinking the spots of sun which filtered through the maples and hemlocks and birch, no the birch was gone, that surrounded the garden and made it a refuge for laurel and azaleas, trillium, the white and the red, and wild bleeding heart and dogwood in May. Narcissus and scylla slept fat with the next spring's life in shaded corners of the garden. Robert always thought that Emily and the sunlight were like the hummingbird and the foxglove and delphinium. That sunlight was her nectar.

Then Robert thought about bread and all the food he liked to cook. He always had success with his bread when company came. And after almost eleven years he had gotten Emily to like zucchini with minced garlic and mozzarella cheese. So Emily and Robert usually liked to have company because their guests enjoyed the food.

But Grandpa never liked iced tea. And there was no Postum in the house. Robert had tried to drink Postum once because he had remembered that Grandma and Grandpa always had. That was before they died, Grandma first. And Robert had started using whole grains in his baking and was pretty much sold on the nutritional soundness of organic food without preservatives or additives. And freshness was his passion. And Emily and Robert had reduced their salt intake by substituting herbs and spices and sweet red peppers and lemons and, as much as they could, they used a good grade of olive oil. Robert had not been able to give up sweet homemade butter fresh from Mary Ellen's. He just didn't like Postum, even with lots of milk and honey in it the way Grandpa used to have it. Robert had quickly gone back to coffee, the beans fresh ground, but he was careful not to drink more than two cups a day. Emily told him that he was nervous enough without adding coffee to his nerves.

The last time Robert had seen his grandfather was after his Grandma died, and then Grandpa came to live with Robert and his sister and his parents, and Grandpa had taught Robert how to tell time in two languages and play Rummy, and then Grandpa had gone to a nursing home, Robert was told. Then he was told that Grandpa was dead. Many years later, Robert had seen in his own driveway a wonderful mourning dove slowly taking its breakfast, taking each bite with care and choice. He loved to watch the birds, singly or in pairs, strolling through the perennial borders or along the drive lunching as they went slowly along on their way. That day he admired a single dove. He smiled as he watched it move. Robert caused the bird no alarm. He wouldn't do that. But before Robert could believe his eyes he saw, just twenty feet from him, that same dove caught by a hawk, its wings spread and moving surely to keep it aloft just enough to lift the dove, so shocked that its eyes bulged, an inch above the driveway. The hawk's claws were a deadly embrace on either side of the dove's fine gray breast. Paralyzing. And as the hawk's wings beat slowly, the claws of that bird kneaded its prey until that fine head drooped. In seconds, and with no blood, and there had been no cry, but only Robert's confusion of feelings, the small elegant bird took a ride with the hawk to some skyward feast.

Robert, along with his sister and cousins, was part of the procession of grandchildren that filed past the open coffin as they were instructed to do that clear warm day in Illinois at least twenty-five years ago. There had been a heavy smell of flowers that had no individual identity for Robert. He had tried to open his eyes as he walked past the coffin. He always thought he had seen his grandfather lying there. He had dreamed so many times about looking into the coffin that he was sure he had.

Grandpa did look good sitting in the back seat of the station wagon. The interior of the car was shaded, but Robert could tell that Grandpa had his three-piece suit on. It was like the one that he wore even after he retired from the Packard business. Before that, Grandpa had been a harness maker in Redbud. Grandpa always wore a small diamond stickpin in his necktie.

There was no question any longer about offering or serving anyone anything. Nobody had really said much after the car had driven up. Robert couldn't tell, but maybe his mother and dad had said a few words. It had been almost four years since they had had a chance to talk. Goodness, they had been married for almost fifty years. Robert suspected that after all that time they could talk to one another even when they didn't appear to be talking.

Robert was getting nervous. The problem was that he knew he was going to have to tell his Grandpa and his Dad goodbye.

Emily was still bathed in sunlight. It was as though she was posing to have her picture taken. The sunlight lit up her hair and made a halo against the shadows in the garden. Robert's mother held her head tilted up toward the sun to get some of the sun's tanning rays. She always said that she used moisturizer and a sun block to protect her skin from aging.

The station wagon was on an island in the middle of the street. Emily and Robert's mother were back in the garden about a block away. The front window in the station wagon was open, and Robert decided to look at his grandfather. So he poked his head in through the passenger side of the car and saw his grandfather's gray eyes, still, calm, pleasant enough.

Robert thought about telling his dad how much he appreciated seeing the two of them again and that he thought his mother really enjoyed the visit. But the afternoon had been so quiet, not a word, really, had been spoken, and Robert had forgotten to introduce Emily.

Of course he wasn't really surprised when his father got in the back seat of the car and sat next to Grandpa. Robert thought he saw his father put his arm around Grandpa and hold him close, and then he could have sworn that the two men even smiled at him.

Robert even thought that the two men were wearing identical suits. That was unlikely, though, for Robert was sure that the last time he saw his father the man was wearing those faded blue work pants and an old, short-sleeved white shirt, the outfit he used to paint the house in during the summer years ago. ☐

EDWARD HAWORTH HOEPPNER

AN AUDIENCE FOR THE MINOTAUR

Oh, after the livestock show,
in feed hats and a week's growth
the old men chat like woodpeckers
over the usual puzzle. Then,
tired, oh, they pedal their wives
home, or the other way around,
the same bicycle. Kids too were
amazed, bedazzled as dolphins
deep in their velvet chairs,
the Nut-Cracker's magic. Everywhere
they are they are the center,
short swords of light strung
from the chandelier above the theater,
streetlamps over dinner tables,
a candle's cage of fire. But oh,
it is the young fathers who are
mystified, no longer burning
their gloves when the crowd takes off
like popcorn from the gravity
of this maze. Each one unwinds
a thread toward bed-time
when they kill the lights, pad
from the front hall to the kitchen
checking doors, floss in the moon
through the bathroom shades, and go
to dream. There, in great pods
of darkness flashing they spout
like misty whales. Oh, they heave
sighs, and bulls rise in black
pastures full of timothy and clover,
the scent of an axe. In no room
at all they drift, and then, oh,
the tunnels in their hearts begin
to straighten, and to fill
with a careful and curious sleep.

SOMETHING LIKE A RISK

Anne Calcagno

A Monday came when Dad ate breakfast with us, instead of earlier. While we ate corn flakes, scrutinizing him, his attention pierced the newspaper. His shirt was pressed, he had his suit pants on. When we were downstairs, he suddenly called loudly to us from the kitchen window which was high on the side of the six-story apartment building festooned with laundry lines. As we turned to him, surprised, he began waving with large sweeping gestures. The windblown laundry rose like a congregation, waving in unison. I became newly aware of perimeters beyond our front door, pieces of intimate apparel of families, the wives come and gone, like ministers from their services, leaving their wards to fly loose. Then Susie and I turned and ran for the school bus.

For a week, every morning, he waved to us. One afternoon, just as I returned from school, he said, "Maria, let's get your mother to cook us some chops." And he took me to the store where we'd never been together before. His hand was so warm my hand sweated. I was nine years old. He talked about the buses in our town, which still ran on electricity; he told me about the cabling system. It was rattletrap transportation now and, once, it was grand. You could see the lines, the hooks that ran from the bus roofs. Sometimes these sparked and the people who stood waiting lifted up their heads as if this was the beginning of something. But the buses fizzed and popped and went on. Occasionally the hooks came off and caused traffic jams.

"I don't want to lose you, love," Dad whispered and held my hand to his leg as we entered the butcher's shop. The ladies hustled and a few squeezed ahead. One tugged on Dad's elbow, brashly passing herself forward.

■

Dad dropped my hand suddenly, and called out, "What the hell, I'm not a step ladder." The lady looked at him, her fat arms frozen half in the air. The women always did this. Mom said you had to integrate people who had rude and pressing needs into your life. She said, "We all get our feet stepped on just a little. I don't know why. It's not too bad." Dad said, "Get behind me. You lay a hand on me again and I'll be pushing you back."

The lady muttered, "What's your problem? Pick on someone your own size."

People frowned. "She was pushing in line," Dad said. Then very loudly again, "She was pushing in line, God dammit."

The butcher looked up from the chops he'd been slicing, with beautiful and cruel precision, his face with bluish-purple veins, puffed and serious. He said, "Do you want me to call the police?" The ladies pulled their coats around their shoulders.

At dinner, the pattern of veins in the pork stared back, still and intricate as the lines of blood vessels on the butcher's face, and I remembered all those faces watching me. They'd become a room of mirrors, pressing, pushing me into myself. I didn't like it when Dad said he was right.

We left suddenly for the Gloucester shore a few days later. It was May, in the middle of the week; still we got off school. The ocean always lifted up Mom's dreams and we were carried in them, in the car filled with maps. Every four day week-end or holiday we left for a new place on the Atlantic shore. Dad understood she would be renewed with the sea. He liked to buy her sea-related presents: shell bracelets, lamps whose bases were filled with water. At the beach, Mom lifted her eyes to the sun like a telescope collecting the universe. Her skin turned pink and lively as geraniums.

The sea near Gloucester was cobalt and turquoise. The beach was deserted; Susie and I ran on the beach, the sand so hot on top and freezing an inch under our toes. Dad ran up to me and grabbed my waist and swirled me in circles over the sand. He hadn't done that in so long and we were laughing and laughing. In the evening, we ate pink crab. In our photo album I was standing with Susie, who is six, on a green hill, our eyes squinted, looking sheepish, tans burnished on our faces. My legs are long, and my hair is brown and short like Dad's. I loved him.

Driving at a high speed toward home that Sunday, Dad said, "I'll take care of things around the house."

Mom said, "Please don't worry." He gripped the steering wheel. Only a few weeks before our trip, Dad had used to creep in late at night, part of silence, the door lightly clicking him in. Now, while Susie and I did homework, he stormed through the apartment, hammering and bolting. The house tossed and turned through his hands making repairs. I was intrigued with the other apartments; how many people had returned to their homes and started repairing? Under the sink he adjusted, Dad's knees bent up like narrow mountains. His neck and head were slim and chiseled, his nose aquiline. Things happened to him. The guy at the hardware store didn't know anything about bolts, people swerved in front of him in traffic. At the dinner table he loudly explained these things that caused him to shout. I had never heard so many stories. Every evening, the world jumped into the house like fat crickets.

"They could've trained him. Service is the name of the game. He tried to tell me it was the transformer but I know wiring. It was the third place I'd been to. So I called the manager; he got me the wires. I told him they lose their clients when they can't provide service. Don't they train them? And he just said the guy was new. I said, 'incompetent.' When you run around the city all day the last thing you want to think is that what you want is behind an idiot's back who just doesn't know where to look for it."

"You're making yourself nervous," Mom said. The tops of her shoulders and thin arms blushed red and she gripped the stem of her wine glass.

"For Chrissake, I was right," Dad said.

A couple of weeks later, it was twilight, and Dad was changing a light bulb, standing on a chair in the kitchen. He had passed by me in the hall and he smelled of warm wool. I followed him and watched in the semi-darkness. He screwed the light bulb in and it didn't work and he fiddled with some wires, but the light still didn't work; he lifted the bulb and tossed it violently to the floor, shattering it into a hundred delicately singing pieces. Outlined by the window, perched on the limbs of the kitchen chair, he turned into an ugly raven. My muscles constricted. For a moment the clear evidence of a flaw that gripped him pulsed wildly through my limbs. He saw me. His face changed. "Honey babe, get me a light bulb from the closet." I ran. When I returned he was painstakingly twisting and tucking the wires; he took the bulb from me, placed it. The light came on. He straightened himself and said, "I'm not as good without you, honey." His anger had lifted quickly, like a flock of birds jumping from a wire to the sky. I watched it become tiny. I felt misled.

Some evenings Mom was tired from work and didn't cook. Dad let us eat cereal. One evening, while Susie and I were eating cornflakes with fruit, Dad seated himself across from us, pulling the newspaper tightly in front of him, so that it snapped. He buried his face in the paper. All at once, I pictured him waving with the laundry at the kitchen window; I became terrifically conscious once more of all the apartments around us, insulated and unknown. The kitchen light was bright and furious. Susie kicked me under the table. "Quit it," I said. She giggled. In two minutes she was touching my shin with the tip of her shoe. I kicked her.

"That hurt," she shouted.

"I can't read," Dad said. "Stop it now."

Susie reached over and took two strawberries from me and suddenly Dad pushed her face into the cereal bowl. She jumped back, sputtering, covered with crumpled cornflakes, with lines of milk dripping from her nostrils, her arms beginning to flap up and down, like a chicken. "Why do you have to bicker, for Chrissake?" Dad asked. Susie began to cry, the pieces falling off her face, and she ran into the bathroom, and Mom looked amazed and hurried to help her. "Wasn't it hard not to laugh?" Dad whispered.

When Mom was tucking us each into bed, she tilted her thin throat to my cheek and whispered, "Daddy loves you two so much. Sometimes love is very painful. You feel like you're on a tightrope and you could fall. Daddy won't fall, though." I had never heard of anything like that.

Then, one morning, he was gone before us. In the next few days I heard his disappearance returning, the evenings going quiet. I recognized an old cycle in our way of life, the end of an interlude in which suppertimes moved in leaps and bounds, jumping with stories; we regained a taciturn world. His waving hand left us, taking with it the strange bewitchment of those sudden days of noise.

Dad's new job was as a General Manager. He reorganized the department and things got done. He pushed hard. In three years, on Mom's birthday, he presented her with a rolled up, ribboned contract: she signed the deed to a small square house with a doorfront that stared at the Atlantic. We drove up for a long week-end. The beach was sandy; there were cliffs bleached white and the ocean stung the air with sprays of salty emerald green. The sky squatted over it, very fatly blue. Mom smiled a lot, her thin lips tilted like the prow of a boat, her eyes inhaling the sea, their green brightening. I thought her face became smoother, as if watching the waves wore it gently.

In the evening Dad sat by her on the front steps and the sunset glittered on their faces. Without looking at Dad, she said his name, took his hand, pressed it on her thigh as if she could pull the air and the sea through her eyes and lay it there for him.

Each morning of our many stays there we left in our yellow boat, the engine humming lightly. Dad decided where each thing should be placed and reminded us. He sat in the back by the engine. Sometimes we stepped on carefully placed, destructible things with our inattention. His face got red. When the land was a white splinter, we'd drop the anchor. Susie and I jumped in, and floated on the million layers of blue. I liked to imagine prehistoric fish far below, unthreatening and bizarre because they disliked the light. The coconut oil made us sleek as seals. The sun bent over us melting the hours. We ate enormous sandwiches. Mom and Dad drank wine; she giggled. Then, they slept. We rocked in the swells.

One August week-end, the waves rose in long white hands grasping for high places on the cliffs. The air was so clear and brilliant it sharpened new islands onto the horizon, thin black lines like the backs of moving whales; but it was water moving over them. I became aware that the sea brought out new islands at the same time that it made them unreachable. As if the world was always throwing things at you expressly for the purpose of their not being graspable. And there was a thin strip of an island always accessible close to the shore and now it narrowed into a flickering shelf at which the sea threw itself. "We ought to try it," Dad said. "We'll get a tremendous view of the squall from over there. All right. Time to prepare a picnic." Some fat clouds charged away behind him.

"You can't bring the kids," Mom said, squinting, waving her hands in the air. Veins were swelling on her throat.

"Jessie, if there's a problem, we'll turn back. My God, but don't be ridiculous, the day's clear. Put a few sandwiches in the duffle bag. Get some towels, Maria," he said to me. "And help your sister get ready."

Our boat bobbed slowly in the harbor. Everything was in, in order. Dad veered the boat slowly. Mom said, "Susie, Maria; you are absolutely not to stand up." Then we burst out of the calm harbor inlet. The boat lunged and jolted; we were climbing up hills of water which dissolved, dropped hold of the boat, slapped it back up. Susie's hat flew off, and the pink ribbon lifted and twirled like a jellyfish. She stared at it wide-eyed, then the sea began spitting bucketfuls into the boat; we were tossing it out with paper cups. Mom began shouting, "We've got to turn back. We won't make it, Lee. Lee!" The wind whipped into her words. Dad's head bent forward like a harpoon. Half-way there the engine idled, then quit. My feet were sunk in water. It sloshed, the boat rose. Dad stood up, his limbs too long to look balanced, his arms sinewy and straining the starter rope. It snapped back and made him jump. Again then again. Then he was flying in a cartwheel first into the sky then to the leadened water. Mom screamed, "Girls, look for your father! He'll drown. Oh God. Find your father!" We saw him. Behind us, his hands waving, smashing the water. Mom was screaming while his hands gripped onto the boat. We pulled him in; he had lost his glasses. Mom was throwing half-wet towels on him. He clambered toward the engine, and tugged again. On the third try it sputtered and we were moving, in leaps, back to the harbor, scooping water furiously along the return that tilted us like little hooks to the sea's rioting jaw. In the harbor Dad was saying, "We made it. We made it." And he pulled me to him. "My sweet wet little muskrat: we're going to get you bundled up now." Susie started to cry. Her hair was blown into brown sticks flying straight out from her ears. Dad took a towel and wrapped it around her, and she shuffled home. Mom wouldn't talk all through dinner. When she kissed us at night, her face puckered, she said. "My life has never been dull."

I pulled the covers close and tight over half my face. I didn't know what Dad wanted, but us. We whirled around with something in his head like a risk. We didn't predict what happened; he didn't see his part. I thought: a family is half-blind. Then I slept deep and hard and freshly troubled.

Mom worked in an office doing research on fruits and vegetables, the way they reacted to soils; she was doing a study on large land grants. Dad was supervising the development of a new branch department. He had just been handed a new boss, a man brought in unexpectedly. Dad raised his voice late at night and his words filtered down the hall. "Jessamyn," he said to Mom, "How am I supposed to run this operation? He isn't logical. Christ, they had to do this to me."

Mom said, "Listen to yourself. *They're* not doing anything to you. Try to understand what happens around you. Watch things unfold, Lee, for once."

"For Chrissake, it's a business. Do you know how expensive he's going to make this operation?"

Friends of this boss filled in new jobs. Some were protective and disliked Dad's advice extremely. Dad said that if he won these points he wouldn't lose again. "It's a community, Lee," Mom said. "No one wants you to run it all."

"He hired operators who have never once been on time. I explained that to him. I wanted to know how he thought he was going to get away with it."

"You didn't," Mom said. He nodded. She said, "You're jeopardizing yourself for nothing." Rubbing her hands one in the other, she added sadly, "You don't want to learn."

"Jessie, maybe you don't understand profit is the one thing a corporation is run for."

Apparently, the boss didn't want to listen to Dad any longer. He warned Dad and Dad grew red in the face talking about it. Then Dad was sent home.

He ate breakfast with us. He opened the newspaper so hard it snapped. He didn't wave from the kitchen. I didn't want to come home from school. At dinner Mom was quiet, her hands shifting like a breeze. The silverware didn't clink. The lids of her eyes bent like half-shutters and she stared at the utensils. Then she said, "We've got the sea house. If it gets bad, honey." I saw her eyes fixed on the sea, amazed.

"Goddamit," Dad said. "We won't do that. Don't talk that way!" Then he stared at her. He put his hand on her arm. "Baby, I'm so sorry. It won't cost us the house. My God. Girls; do you understand now I've been fired?" He suddenly stared up at Susie and me, his eyes wide and frozen like a deer stunned by carlights. All at once, he grabbed my shoulders, crushing me in a fierce embrace. I became a stone in his arms.

I got on the soccer team, and started a part-time job working with emotionally disturbed children who made me forget myself. I managed a schedule that would bring me home late.

Mom supported us, and her extra hours took off the rounded edges of her face, her eyes swelling out of it, sweaty-looking like overripe fruit. Her legs were lean as branches. "Can't you eat Mom?" I asked her.

She wiped her hand slowly across her flat stomach and flashed me a glance. "You have some nerve," she muttered. Dad had begun to sit still in the living room chair, his feet up, the newspaper dropped on his lap. I went into the living room. "Hi, Daddy."

"Hi, honey, look: that painting's crooked," he said. I looked at the picture across from him on the wall. "Someone dusted it and brushed it too hard. Did you dust it?" he asked. I straightened it. "Dusting must be very quiet," he said. His feet hung over the edge of the footstool.

And the days began in which he seemed planted into his chair. The living room grew soundless. Susie signed out a lot of books from the public library; she closed her bedroom door. Dad's eyes kept a startled look; he watched the room preoccupied, as if anticipating an event.

"Just be careful," he murmured to me one day.

"Of what?"

"The world is made up of little pieces, all building blocks."

We were waiting for him to recover himself. What substance we had in him I couldn't name. I felt something of mine should burst into him like a robin, and take flight and free him. But the living room was so still, all my movements turned heavy, and my voice was high-pitched, talking cheerfully, with caution. I wanted to shout, "Do you see how this happened?" He wrung his fingers. My larynx leapt onto a skinny high branch. I wanted to know he wasn't contagious. And then, after a few months, I felt myself opening the shutters of that room and going away. I decided he had a path, fenced off; it was his private property.

Mom fed Dad the dishes he loved; southern fried chicken, pork chops, Brussels sprouts. She watched him eat, then got him up to go to the movies. She studied the newspapers. "This is a decent deal. It's offering a high pay. Honey, this is something you have to check up on."

Dad said, "Oh, yes. Well, write it down, Jessie."

One afternoon, the phone rang and it was for Dad. He bent himself into the phone like an old man, then he was in agreement with the caller and raised his voice: "You remember that?" And when he was off the phone, he walked to the closet, put on his coat and walked out of the house.

When he returned he pulled Mom over: "Jessamyn, I was a Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde at work. There was one good side, a planner, a shaker. These days I have believed I was completely blind. But I had the right things to give to some people. At least that."

"Who called?" Mom asked.

"He used to work for me." Dad sat down, then got up, and walked around the kitchen looking at the floor. He looked up at Mom, "He was talking to me about work and each person seemed to me to have a flaw. I was an x-ray machine: I spotted the problem—while he was trying to update me. Which meant I couldn't register anything he said. I had my mind on the problem. I was letting him slip through my fingers. I was going to lose him and who else had called all this time? Listen, Jessie, I'm taking my mind off the problems. Watch."

He went for a walk the next day and on subsequent days, and then it was a habit. He came home with ridiculous questions. He stared into my pupils like a prosecutor or analyst.

"Maria, does it matter to you very much if the children appreciate your work?"

"Yes, Dad."

"Good. Gratitude. People don't make it without it."

Mom pushed his hair back gently, and looked into his eyes and he smiled. He held her hand and talked to her, "Jessamyn, everything is so unusual. Did you expect that?"

He was eager and preoccupied. Mom humored him though I thought he had returned to us as a child. It wasn't so. In the springtime he picked up the newspaper, and he searched. He was deliberate. It began with his dressing up carefully, neatly in the mornings. With a red marker, he circled the places he'd write to, or call. The list built up of mornings he had gone out in his blue suit, of rejections. He said, "They're not wild about middle-aged men." He had his hair cut by a more fashionable stylist. He ordered contact lenses; in them his eyes looked larger and direct. After five months' search, Dad came home one night, slapped his hat down on the table. "We're in," he said. A failing company had hired him: he was selected to rehabilitate their image, premises, estate. It was a last chance they were putting money into. Dad grinned. "I have to build it up from failure. By God, isn't that my baby?"

Dad brought blueprints home, designing late into the night. "I'm not letting this go," he said at the dinner table. He discussed the temperaments of those who came under his supervision, reviewed them like rare flora, curious as though for something of his own. Dad's presence was large and occupied. The one thing on my mind was getting out of high school, being on my own. Dad asked me some evenings to sit with him in the living room.

I told him, "I don't have time."

One night he came into my bedroom and shook me awake gently. "Maria," he whispered, his fingers lingering like moth wings on my forehead. "You grew up so fast, love. I've been thinking about it and I can't sleep. Did you have a lot of things to say to me?"

"Dad, I can't remember them." I pulled the covers up to shake off his hand.

Mom had begun wearing more make-up, not too much, enough so that the color of her eyes became lovely cool centers and Dad couldn't seem to keep his eyes off them. Her face grew smoother again, as if the house was filling with the air of the sea, as if she brought it, though for months Dad had been too busy to vacation.

He was walking in large steps, throwing his stamina around like manna, so surrounded by it that things in the street became invisible to him, or immaterial, and he waited intently in lines, thinking of his work. Day after day he repeated the solution he had found in the months in the living room: "Try your best. Don't run scared. It's not all up to you." The simplicity of what had rejuvenated him mystified me, left me attentive in a strange indirect way. The words were unequal to the weight of his belief.

Over the year the company started to grow, and made a profit; it seemed they would have enough money to purchase a merger that would give them more stability, more of an investment, a bulwark, a better foundation for success. And Dad would facilitate this merger, continuing and developing the image he had forged. "I got my dream," Dad said. He was told people worked well for him. "This was meant to happen to you all along," Mom said. And it happened.

In August, the company's Boston headquarters were contacted directly by the proprietor with an offer to buy the new division at a price so good it was hard to refuse. The merger prospect had been built up by a self-made man, and this proprietor's only stipulation was an allegiance to his family. The sale was proffered on the condition that the nephew he had weaned for presidentship would have charge of the merger.

Dad was taken out for a special dinner. The company gave him high praise and an impressive severance pay. He turned slowly to each of us at the dinner table, "But I said I'd compromise in any way. I was willing to step down and work for the young man. I told them they shouldn't lose me." His voice was muffled as it had been all those nights when I heard him through the walls and fell asleep. It seems his bosses were attentive and at the end they wouldn't look him in the eyes. Their plans were set. "You did a great job and we don't believe you should step down. You've done nothing wrong," they said.

"How could they say that?" Dad asked us. We didn't know where he might have gone wrong. "I must have," Dad said. But no one said that.

Dad was always thin, as if his temper had had an appetite and had yearly left only his skin strapping and tight. And now it was too late for his body to change. When I thought of how I came from him, I sometimes thought I came from a fate with a diagonal streak of bad luck and flying words. They clapped my ears, hit my mind. He and Mom left immediately for a trip to the sea house. I could call to mind countless excursions speeding in the car filled with maps for an emerald ocean. And from the house's front door, the rocks across the inlet were worn and smooth. The sea always filled Mom's cheeks; they glowed. Her hair turned lightly bronzed after two weeks. And I wondered if she could always be open to beauty; wondered if she'd ever lose the element in the sea she stared at; I'm sure she saw something which couldn't unravel. She put her hand to his knee, pulling the sea into him maybe. She did that. She filled like a conch shell with the ocean music inside her, and pressed her hand on Dad so that the singing might rise up through him, too.

As Mom had pulled out into the road, Dad suddenly snapped out of a reverie he'd been in for hours, turned, and waved furiously to Susie and me. My eyes felt like hot coals. I didn't want him to wave. I whispered to myself: frailty isn't a game or a weakness of muscle. His hand used to pull me up. He brought me with him like a prize, steering me through days in which I began to cringe because he fought the world blindly while it calculated his blindness. He walked me into a solitude delicate as a scorpion, but vast and hollow. I tried to snatch my hand back; somehow, he'd stung and sunk in me. Because I couldn't displace him, I made him indebted to me for my pains. Except I couldn't keep up with the displeasure I intended to thrust at him. Our fate swung a much wider punch and I saw Dad falling as in a dream where my cries to him were mute. This was life. I wondered if the heavens laughed at us but no one made a statement. ☐

COMING IN THE NAR:

The 173rd-Anniversary Issue

Fiction: Lee K. Abbott, Melvin Walker La Follette Barry Sanders, Susan Dodd, Jeanne McCulloch Ursula Hegi and Monica Wood

Non-Fiction: Suzan Erem, Thomas H. Thompson, Perry Glasser, Carolyn Hardesty, Loree Rackstraw

■

Goodnight Piece

Kay Morgan

My mother's name was LaVern, and she was an odd sort of mother. Not that she seemed so odd at the time, but now she seems very odd indeed. Odd and endearing. She tried to keep a firm grip on life by never succumbing to sleep. Of course she did sleep, but she didn't believe in it, or rather, she did believe in it, but not in the way most people do. Sleep was her enemy.

My mother considered life to be a tragically tenuous situation. Combine this with her philosophy that human beings are weak, that when we finally lay ourselves down to die we lie down very still with our eyes shut tight, and that sleep mimics this state to a tee, and—well, you don't have to be very smart to make the connection. I don't think I was particularly brilliant, but I made the connection right off the bat. I identified strongly, as the doctors would say. My mother's enemies became my enemies, and the most dangerous of them all was sleep.

For most of my life we shared the same bed, she and I, in the big beige bedroom at the rear of the house. My father slept alone in a small room off the kitchen. I still don't know why this was so, despite the reason he offered, which was that ever since his Army days he found himself unable to stand sleeping with anyone at all. Including my mother.

Why she put up with this I'll never know; perhaps because, in the long run, I made a better bed partner, for I was willing—although conditioned might be a better word—I was conditioned to lie, night after night, curled up around her body, helping her keep her vigil against darkness and the dreaded arrival of sleep.

What I could never understand was why we bothered going to bed at all, since sleep was not our mission. Wouldn't it be better, I remember thinking, to stay up, to walk about, to wash walls or countertops until we dropped? Because dropping was inevitable and my mother knew it. It always happened. No matter what tactics she employed, we always fell asleep.

Isn't the mind, isn't memory, peculiar? My mind can travel backward in time, it can go back to places the rest of me can't go; but in doing this, how much do I re-order or invent? Do I invent it now, or did I invent it then? And if the present has no end, how can I call what happened before *the past*?

I kept a journal. But today, when I go back and read that journal, my mind calls out, No, no, it wasn't that way at all! That is not how I remember it!

Consider this entry:

"School was again unbearable, yet again I lived through it. It's true, isn't it, Diary, that when one is loved one can love? Well, I am not loved. Not by anyone. Oh I still say that to love life and to have a kind thought for everyone is the only way to live—but I will never live that way, for I have no kind thoughts for anyone. Answer me this, Socrates—why do we live?"

I don't remember thinking that way at all! Surely I was exaggerating, surely I was writing down lies. I enjoyed school. I always enjoyed school. And, for the most part, I'm certain that I always felt loved. Well, perhaps I have closed my eyes to reality, but not to my own memories. In the end, it is only my memories that are my own.

I remember once asking my mother why it was that anyone at all had to go to bed with her, since fighting off sleep was surely something that a person could do by herself.

Why don't you just lie there alone?

Because I'd fall asleep.

But you do that anyway.

But who would be here to know?

My memory is that this explanation made perfect sense to me. I was to be the witness, the one who would be there to see and know and, if necessary, to fight. Still, frightened of sleep as she was, my mother always took a sleeping pill before she came to bed. She was a warrior. In order to fight a worthy battle, she stacked the odds against herself. She carried her opponent inside.

■

Talk to me.
Oh, Mama. What about?
Anything. I don't care.
You already know everything.
Well, we'll sing then.

The songs. Maybe we'd start out with *Down in the Valley* or *The Wreck of the Old Ninety-Seven.* Songs from her youth. We'd sing softly, so as not to wake my father. The moment I felt her body begin to slide towards sleep it was my duty to pull her back, to wake her by poking her foot with my toe or by nudging my elbow into her side. This was a task I was more than happy to perform because by this time the prospect of her sleep was also a source of terror to me. I imagined what it would be like lying next to a dead person.

Mama.
What. Was I asleep?
Yes.
But not you?
No. Not yet.
Good. Have I told you about the time I worked for the old German woman who kept her dead husband's ashes on her dressing table?
Yes.
Okay. This time I'll fill in the details.

Then she'd start in with her own memories, memories which never quite got around to filling in the promised details. The old German woman was rich, mean and ugly—a combination my mother swore always went together.

"Where I come from they buried their dead. Jesus, how was I to know that the stuff in the jar was a burned-up dead man and not some expensive powder or the like? So, one afternoon when I thought old lady Boeker was out of the house, I shook some of the stuff into my cupped hand and sniffed it—no odor—and tried patting it on my cheeks. I was young. I was poor. The rich sure do have strange tastes, I thought. But the old lady came in and saw what I was doing. She came flying at me, shrieking a string of bad names in German, and clubbing me with both fists. Bitch!"

It is difficult to say about her memories, which by now have come to be my own—it is difficult to say how factual they were, for so many of them seemed to exist only to alter my own particular feelings or behaviors. But, I suppose, this can be said about my own memories as well, and not only my memories, but my ideas, my dreams, my whole inner world. The elements of this inner world are invisible, and when I transfer these memories into speech, something else happens, as if the mere fact of speech, even of writing my memories down, changes them once again.

Perhaps I only imagined I knew my mother. Perhaps she only imagined that she knew me. Neither of us knew what the other was really thinking, we only knew what the other was saying or doing. Perhaps we all live in a fictitious world of fictitious people or, if it is not entirely fictitious, it is at least entirely misunderstood.

*

There were other stories. The twins she took care of, Mary Anne and Lester, and how sweet they were, two sweethearts who went to incredible lengths just to please her. Each time she told the Mary Anne and Lester story, it felt like a thousand pins were sticking in me. To get even, I'd pretend to go to sleep and stay asleep even when she'd nudge me.

Usually, though, it was good to lie beside her with my arm around her waist, or hers around mine when we rolled over to face the other way. I'd breathe in the remains of her morning splash of cologne and snuggle up close and feel safe. I'd think of things that had happened during the day and listen for her breathing to become slow and even. And finally, when neither one of us could fight it any longer, we'd say our special words and fall asleep together with my father's loud snores filling in the background from his refuge in the little bedroom.

We called the special words the *goodnight piece.* Well past midnight, when both of us were in the final stages of our surrender, one of us—it didn't matter which one—would poke the other and whisper, "Say the goodnight piece."

The *goodnight piece* protected us. It moved us—safely, we hoped—from one world to another. Even when my girlfriends spent the night, I would find myself slipping down the stairs to the big bedroom to say our special words.

Goodnight.
I love you.
See you in the morning.
I'll be there.
Hmmmmm.

The *hmmmmm* was a long, drawn-out sound we always made in unison and it was this *hmmmmm* that at first comforted me and later steeped me with embarrassment. Imagine a big girl like me slipping into her mother's bed after spending the evening petting with Duane Baster or Raleigh Challman, and saying something as silly as *hmmmmm* in unison, with her mother!

But as embarrassed as I was, I felt compelled to say it and I kept on saying it even after I left my mother's bed and married my first husband, insisting that he say the *goodnight piece* with me.

Say it, Tom.
It's stupid. I hate saying it.
I know, so do I. Say it anyway.
I'm not your mother.
I can't help that. Say it anyway.
Hell. Goodnight.
I love you.
See you in the morning.
I'll be there.
Hmmmmm.

Returning to my mother, I cannot say exactly when our nighttime ritual stopped seeming like a game and took on a more uneasy quality, but in my mind—in that uncertain terrain of memory—the change seems linked to the night my grandmother died. For that was the night I realized something about death: it happens. No matter what you are doing, no matter what chanted-out verbal amulet you are waving against the darkness, someone is dying.

And on that particular night, my father and mother and I shared the same bed.

"We'll stay together all night," my father said. "And don't worry about sleeping. We won't. Now. What is it you girls usually talk about? I think I'd enjoy a good long talk."

But none of us said a word. The livingroom clock thumped out my grandmother's missing heartbeat. My mother's toe jammed into my foot.

"Let's talk about Grandma," I blurted out. "What she was like when she was little."

Drawing the quilt tightly up beneath his chin, my father started to cry. My mother reached into the drawer of her nightstand, grabbed a sleeping pill and pushed it into his open mouth. He didn't even ask what it was. He just swallowed the pill and cried on and on while my mother hummed little snatches of songs and I lay there wishing he would shut up and go back where he belonged. But he didn't budge.

I still remember how the moon looked that night, shining through the side window. It was bright orange and squashed in on one side. Towards morning both my parents were fast asleep, me between them. Their faces were flattened out against their pillows like that squashed side of moon.

Why does this memory still seem so sad to me, so ominous?

Perhaps because that was the night my father tried to become a participant. His usual indifference to our nightly battle with sleep had somehow kept us anchored to the real world, but the night he became an intruder, everything felt changed.

I woke that morning feeling a little different, a little bit less me. But, if I was less myself, who had I suddenly become? This was something I didn't know how to think about; it wasn't anything I could see or touch.

"My beautiful Grandma died last night," my journal for that date reads. "This morning we went to her house and Grandpa gave me her watch and opal engagement ring. The ring fits just perfect on my little finger. I'm engaged!"

No mention of my father sleeping with us. Nothing about the sense of change I felt. So why do I remember—so vividly—a feeling I didn't even bother to write about at the time? And where are the watch and the ring?

But I am a different person now, and my thoughts are a different person's memories. My story's middle isn't really the middle of anything definite, any more than today's being some sort of middle between yesterday and tomorrow. The most interesting thing about a middle or ending or any kind of declared boundary, is that it is usually not the situation that changes—situations tend to remain relatively the same—it is the person who changes, who sets a slightly different course and thereby redefines the boundaries. So it is probably fair to say that on my sixteenth birthday I finally collided with my own life, or with the conditions of my life; conditions which, up to that time, I had never seriously questioned or objected to.

*

I spent the morning of my sixteenth birthday summing up the story of my fifteenth year in my journal. At the bottom of the book's last page, I penciled in four resolutions:

Be more sincere.
Become popular.
Lose virginity.
Sleep in own bedroom.

The plan for the latter part of the day was for me to take the bus downtown where I'd do some shopping with the birthday money my grandfather had given me. Fifteen dollars. Three crisp new five dollar bills straight from the bank.

With my money in hand, I headed straight for the Goodwill Store where I knew I could get the most for it. There I settled on a pair of brown spike heels, a plaid skirt I knew would be too short, a kimono, a doll's tea service, a Japanese wooden doll with a sign that popped up and read *Happy Birthday Stupid* when you pushed down a lever on its side, and a large framed picture of Jesus with sad eyes that followed you around the room.

I felt the Jesus picture would help me attain my birthday resolutions, and if He became too much of a problem—for instance, if He looked too unhappy after I lost my virginity—He could always be turned to the wall.

My mother hated the Goodwill Store; she called everything I bought there Dead People's Things. Her memory's version of the world saw the Goodwill as gleaning its stock, not from unwanted possessions of the living, but from the unavoidably abandoned earthly trappings of the dead.

Her eyes narrowed to slits when I returned home with my arms full of used paper bags.

"You're going to be dead long enough, why pay to speed up the process?" she taunted, speaking out of her conviction that association with the leavings of the dead accelerated one's own arrival at that dread intersection.

"Oh, Mother!"

"Dead People's Things."

"They're not either," I protested, knowing that my objection would be brushed aside by the greater power of her fears.

"And what's that?" she demanded, her eyes lighting on the Jesus picture which, because of its awkward size, stuck out the furthest from the bag.

"Just a picture."

Oh yes, I knew she would hate it.

"Of what? Don't we have enough pictures already?"

She reached into the bag and pulled it out.

"Jesus Christ!" she said as the sad eyes turned to her. "Jesus! I don't want that in my house. It gives me the creeps. Where's the garbage? This goes in the garbage."

"No it doesn't," I said. "It's going in my bedroom. Don't I have a right to at least decorate the way I want? I like it. We saw one just like it at Knott's Berry Farm."

"Now LaVern . . . ," my father cautioned. "It's her birthday."

My mother sat and stared at me. Her eyes were vacant and I had the eerie impression that she was actually in her beige bedroom weighing the fate of my sad-eyed Jesus. My hand began to creep toward the picture.

Too late. A decision had been reached.

My mother raised the picture over her head and crashed it down across her knee, sending splinters of wood flying around the room. Unbelievable.

"Goddammit! Now you've done it!" I yelled. "I hate you!" I turned to my father. "You too! I wish I'd never been born!"

I grabbed my paper bags and what was left of Jesus and ran out of the house. No one came after me. The fact that I had no money left and nowhere to go made me even angrier.

What I remember most clearly about the anger is that it felt wonderful. For the first time in my life I felt myself to be totally separate and unconnected. My rage seemed to be something utterly unique, as though nobody else in the world had ever felt such strong emotion.

When I finally gave up and came home, my father met me at the door.

"Your mother feels pretty bad," he said. "Go talk to her.

"She should feel bad. You saw what she did. Why didn't you stop her?"

"Have a heart, Sharon. She's sorry. She's been in there crying ever since you left."

"She should feel sorry! Why didn't you hit her?"

Though my words showed no mercy, I could feel my emotions changing even as I spoke.

I dropped my rumpled paper bags and went down the hall to the big bedroom. My mother was lying on top of the bedspread, curled up into a little ball.

"I'm back," I said.

"It's late," she replied. "I won't ask where you've been. Come on, it's late. Get in bed."

"I'm going to start sleeping by myself now," I announced. "I'm sixteen."

"Oh God, Sharon, don't start that. You know I can't sleep alone. Come to bed."

The anger came rushing back into my blood.

"You, you, you!" I shouted. "What about me? I'm too old to sleep with you! I'm not a baby! Besides, you don't even sleep! And what about him? You married him, not me. I'm not your husband. Sleep with your husband!"

I'd said it. I'd said the most terrible thing.

Again she stared at me, retreating to that internal tribunal or war room or whatever strange control center existed within, and then adroitly sidestepped the hooking horns of my verbal charge.

"Don't be silly," she said. "You know he can't sleep with anyone. Come on, get in."

Shit, I thought, getting into my nightgown. I lay down beside her, stiff as a board. I'll stay till she goes to sleep and then I'll go upstairs, I thought.

"Put your arm around me," she demanded. "Talk to me."

"I don't feel like talking. Say the goodnight piece."

"It's not time yet. I'm not tired."

"I am," I said. "I need my sleep. Say the goodnight piece."

But she wouldn't. She wouldn't say it.

For what seemed like hours, my mother lay there beside me with her eyes wide open. Eventually, though, the rhythm of her breathing changed and she fell asleep. Then, with all the stealth I could muster, I eased out of her bed and climbed the stairs to my own room. Turning on the table lamp, I slipped under the covers and closed my eyes.

Freedom, I thought.

After a few seconds I opened my eyes.

Need something . . .

I took my largest doll from its position on the dresser and laid it beside my pillow. I smiled at it.

Something's still wrong . . .

Yes. The doll's eyes were closed.

I propped the doll's head up on my shoulder, raising it higher and still higher until the blue glass eyes stayed open.

My mother's voice called out from the bedroom below.

"Sharon? Are you all right? Come sleep with me!" her voice insisted, getting louder and louder.

Another voice, this time my father's.

"Sharon? You up there? Come down and sleep with your mother, she's having a hard time."

I could hear one of them walking around downstairs. Silence. The toilet flushed and then the sink faucet ran. Footsteps on the stairs.

I threw the doll under the bed.

"Your mother asked me to come up and plead with you," said my father's voice from the head of the stair. "Please. You know she'll never go to sleep if you don't go down. I'll get you another picture, I promise."

"It's not the picture," I said, but I could feel myself giving in again. I followed him down the stairs.

"This is just too damn much," I said.

He pretended not to hear me.

It is said that memory softens the blows of the past. Not true. Not for me. I still remember, with chilling clarity, the wave of relief that swept me as I re-entered my mother's bedroom. I knew she was more than grateful for my presence, but she didn't say a word. She didn't give an inch. I crawled in beside her and kept my eyes open until I couldn't stand it anymore, but as soon as my eyes fell shut, they snapped back open again.

I tried to make things different by pretending I could float right up to the ceiling. This wasn't a dream, I was wide awake. I remember looking down at the both of us, and then just at my mother, and thinking: Damn you, damn you, and then: damn her for what? I swear I didn't know. I just floated there and thought about the old German woman and how rich and ugly she was, and about Mary Anne and Lester and how good they were, until everything got all tangled up together; my mother's memories mixed in with my own thoughts.

I saw my mother's eyes close. Then I shut my own.

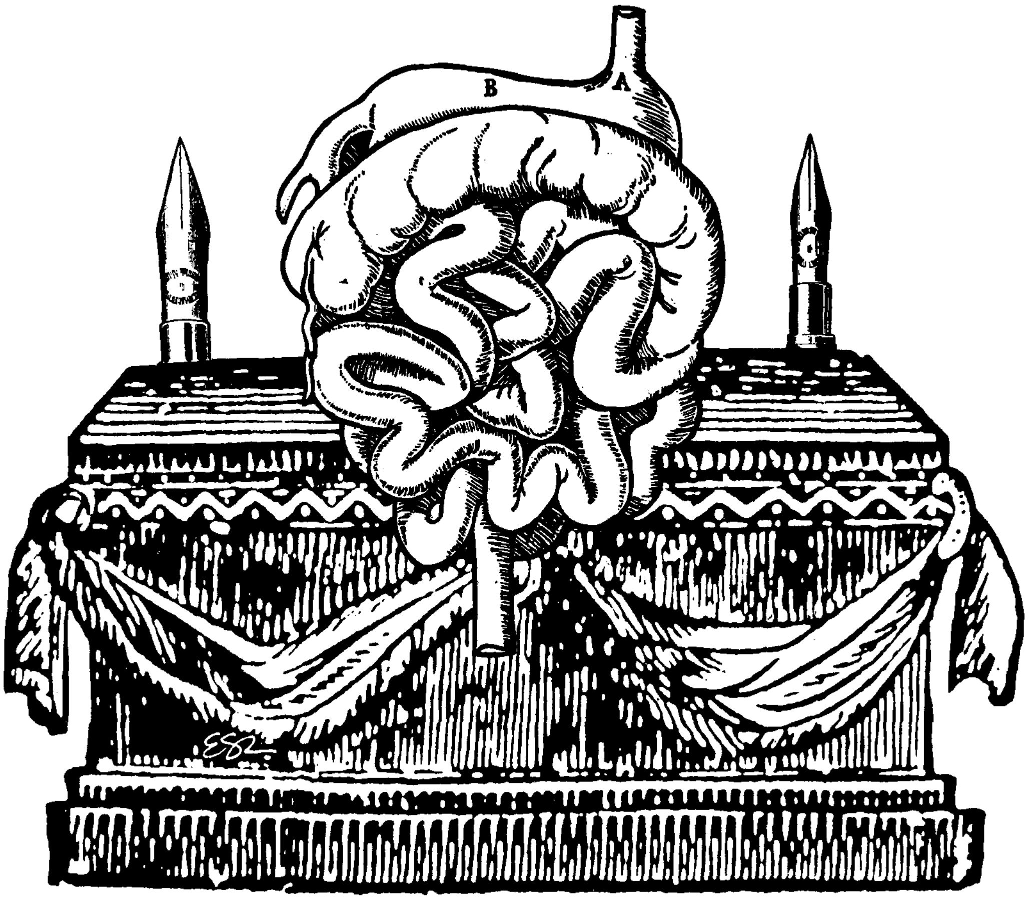
Goodnight, I said.

I love you, she said.

See you in the morning, I said.

I'll be there, she said.

Hmmmmm, we said, we sighed, together. ☐



GOGOL'S STOMACH

Michael Blaine

I am different from other men. My head is thin, elongated, indented at the temples. My nose is curved, it leaks interminably and inside of it is a crippled spine. When I laugh, my lips peel back and I can feel them brush my distended nostrils.

I can smell the mice in the walls, the cheap pipe tobacco of the coachman downstairs, bits and scrapings of previous tenants under layers of lead enamel; in the cracks in the floor, flecks of skin trapped in the amber of old varnish.

Worst of all, my stomach is upside down. I knew about the condition by the time I was twelve, long before the doctor in Paris confirmed my suspicions.

I tried to explain this to Pushkin, but he laughed at me. "That's Gogol for you," he said to Pletynev. "He believes his own nightmares. That's why he's such a genius."

Pushkin's flattery always contains a shade of contempt. But how could he understand, quick and natural as he is? Even his sentences are alive in a thoughtless way, he breathes them, while I can barely write a line that doesn't give me neuritis.

The words run up my pen and into my nervous system like stinging insects.

Princess Z is the only person in the world who understands the queer sensations that assail me. When I met her here in Rome, I was in transports; she had been loved by the czar himself and celebrated in some of Pushkin's finest lines.

One day she came to see me to speak of the mercy of Mother Church (you can find Semenenko the Polish priest rubbing elbows with Slavophiles at her villa), and while I will never leave my faith, I am drawn to the religion of Raphael and Titian.

She had a scheme to catch her son in the Roman web and was so delicate and discreet in her intrigues I couldn't help but admire her.

"So you approve, Nikolai? You agree I am doing the right thing?"

"Oh, certainly, I think you will catch your prey as well."

"And what about this morsel?" she asked, poking her slender finger in my ribs.

"If I could get out of this bed, perhaps . . ." I could hear the mice copulating—a veritable uproar of squeaks and high pitched sighs—the walls were moist and shivering like hot skin. "I can hear every clock in Rome, ticking away," I lied. How could I tell her about mice teeth, scraping like tiny pins?

"Calm yourself, Nikolai, I'll wet a cloth for you." She pressed the cool cotton against my forehead. "You get overexcited, you're so delicate."

"Perhaps I should pray to the Blessed Virgin for relief; these migraines are intolerable." I didn't have the slightest pain in my head until the words popped out of my mouth. And I am fully aware of the clash of doctrine between Rome and the Orthodox view. Still, there is something so sweet about the Virgin Birth, so seductive . . .

"Of course," she swooned, all too enthusiastically, showing her flushed throat. For a woman of forty-five she had an excellent neck, dusted with the faintest hint of powder.

I closed my eyes tightly and immediately saw a hooded figure with her back to me. She was sitting alone in the Café Greco, multi-colored lanterns flickering in the bower above her. I sensed Ivanov and Annenkov were arguing some sordid political question close by, but I knew from the smell of straw and cow flop that this was all a mere screen for the manger itself.

The figure bent over her Chianti, surreptitiously stirring it with her pinkie. In spite of this incongruous gesture, in fact because of that small finger dipped in the cheap red wine, I was convinced she was the Virgin.

I prayed fervently for her to show her face. Princess Z's hand crept across the twisted sheets and twined itself in mine, but I wasn't aroused. (Every taste, every smell, every sound aroused me. All of Rome kept me in a state of perpetual excitement. How could she?)

The figure turned slowly. I begged: Show yourself, Blessed Virgin. A million Ave Marias will be yours. I will gather all the souls in the Ukraine in a braided basket and pour them out at your feet.

I saw the tip of her nose. Flat. Pink. Wide nostriled. Her whole snout. The pouches of fat under her eyes. Her small, piggish eyes and her sow's ears. I snapped open my eyes, cursing all the fouled spots in my brain. Really, it's like a ripe cheese.

"The worst thing is I can't sweat. You know I was thinking of shaving my skull and wearing a wig. Maybe that way the poisons could be excreted."

The princess was in a trance. Smiling sweetly, she nodded agreement, but I could tell she hadn't heard a word. It was just that simpering expression that made me realize she was in the grip of the papists entirely, full of that unctuous pity that licks itself all over.

"Princess, I must get out of here. I'm sure I'm choking." The dark paintings on the walls looked like mud, the statuary I had so carefully arranged crowded in on me. "Let's walk. I'll tell you about, about some revisions I'm planning for *Taras Bulba*. I want to show the Poles in a different light, their higher feelings . . ."

"Are you sure you're well enough?" She stared at me critically, as if I were a plucked goose without enough flesh on its bones.

"Certainly. Just give me a moment to dress. I'm full of energy." My arms were fat sausages full of sand, my legs stuffed bladders.

But once I emerged into *la strada Felice* the Mediterranean sun wrapped her poor son in her healing arms. Grateful for the princess' attention, I stopped at a nearby church to show her its oval cupola and the way the light streamed down upon the nave at that time of day.

"I will show the Poles praying for God's intercession in a church like this, I'll describe this very glass," I said, glancing at her quickly to see what effect this notion was having on her.

After she shooed her footman away, she took my hand and squeezed it tight. I could not tell if it was the blood of passion that surged up in her face or the glow of a fisher of souls raising her net. After a decent interval, I removed my hand, knelt and prayed. Exalted, her face suddenly drained of color as she genuflected beside me.

A vision of Falcone's, near the Pantheon, intruded, but I kept praying until the princess was full. Spiritually. Even then I did not bring up the subject of lunch, although Falcone's broiled lamb, their milk-fed veal, and crostata with cherries swam before me in luxurious profusion.

Instead, I pointed out the noble proportions of the classical architecture, a triumphal arch, a lonely porphyry column. I was in ecstasy over this fragment of lost grandeur when the princess pointed out that we were standing in the middle of a fish market. My nose, usually so tortured with conflicting odors, must have been backed up that day.

It was then that I suggested Falcone's. The meal passed in a dream. Glistening pasta. Stuffed mushrooms. Delicate lamb and oil-glazed tomatoes, they all disappeared beneath my indiscriminate knife. I was aware of how I hunched over my plate, my straight hair drifting into bowls of macaroni and salads, but I had no will.

Finally, after two glasses of claret, I flung myself back in my chair. "I wish I could enjoy eating. It's just impossible." Even as I pronounced these words the orgy continued on my palate, tremors of delight running through my tongue as it darted here and there, picking up a bit of piquant sauce, a stray strand of meat, the aftertaste of garlic.

"Nikolai," she smiled. "You just devoured five courses. You must admit to some small pleasure."

"Perhaps. The lamb was perfection itself."

"There, you see. If you just let yourself relax for a moment, you can enjoy yourself. God didn't put us here simply to mortify ourselves." She said this so chastely I could see why the czar himself was her ardent admirer, yet the sensuality of Rome clung to every word. At that moment, she barely seemed Russian at all. Except for her Tartar eyes, oblique, calculating.

"But don't you see. It's a snare I can't afford to fall into. If I let myself, truly allow myself to enjoy this bread, a bit of eggplant, say, a few glasses of wine, the floodgates will open. I wasn't born for pleasure. It's too intense. I'd never write again.

"But you musn't pity me. It's the source of my strength as well as my agony."

"Poor Nikolai." The wash of her exquisite pity was like my own mother's, transformed to a higher spiritual plane.

"May I take you in my confidence, princess? May I tell you something I never told anyone before?"

She leaned towards me, tilting her head inquisitively. What a model she would make for a Russian heroine. I must use her . . . but I'll make her Orthodox. The censors would never allow . . . and they'd be right, it wouldn't be appropriate.

"Please do, my dear. Secrets are like tarts, best taken after dinner."

"All right. I remember when I first became aware of my stomach and became convinced that it was upside down. I was twelve, still living at the dacha with my mother and sisters. Some local landowner, a dray horse with hooves that could crush your face, stopped by with his daughter for a visit. As monstrous as he was, she was as delicate and pretty. A little cream cake. Just my age.

"I wanted to impress her and frighten her, I suppose. We were sitting on the porch on one of those thick summer evenings in the Ukraine, and all around us were fireflies, clouds of them, flashing white and yellow, sticking to the screens, clotting the lanterns, half-blotting out the light.

"She gave one of those artificial sighs that even a twelve year old girl from country gentry can produce at will and said they were the most beautiful sight she had ever seen. I don't know what it was. The desire to destroy her sugary phrases? Perhaps I wanted to show her how grown up I was, how I knew the ways of the world.

"But anyway, I told her they weren't flies at all, but the thousand eyes of a thousand devils, escaped from their skulls. I told her if she ever let one land on her ankle or her milky arm, she would be soiled forever, her eyes would burst and her tongue would turn black."

"Your character was already formed, I see," the princess remarked archly. But I was too swept up by memories now, in the waves of dead images, to join in the repartee. "You were terrible. What did the little thing say?"

"She wasn't so easily cowed, as a matter of fact. She said I was making it up and that ever since I had started talking I had said nothing but horrid things, and she didn't think I was capable of a single kind, human deed."

"The wasp!"

"But of course she was right. I was quiet for a moment and full of spite. But I looked so wounded she relented a little, even apologizing for being so harsh. I told her it was all from my stomach, it put words in my mouth, being upside down it squirted nasty things up into my mouth and they flew out without my mediation.

"Now she was interested, so I took her to the barn to prove what I said. It was pitch black, so I carried a taper. Still, we could barely see in front of us once we were inside. There was the old, lopsided carriage with its hoary seats and a few empty stalls, piles of broken wagon wheels and a loft full of straw.

"I could tell she was frightened, she held onto my sleeve and almost stopped breathing. But she was stubborn, she wouldn't let on how afraid she was. She said she wanted to see my stomach now, she could hold the taper close and I would show her what it looked like.

"She even helped unbutton my shirt. Her small hands were clever, her fingers tripping inside the cloth across my chest like some five-footed squirrel. The squirrel scratched my chest lightly, groping down inside . . ."

"I don't know if you should be telling me this, Nikolai," the princess said excitedly.

"I must now, I can't stop!" I wasn't sure how much I would tell, I was listening myself to hear what had happened. For the first time I took her hand and squeezed it; I could feel her melting in my grasp. "She said she couldn't feel anything strange, except my jiggling fat. She was quite a minx. I made her feel the knot of my navel to prove things were in the wrong place, but she said she had a friend with exactly the same little nub.

"Angry, I blew out the taper and told her that sitting in the carriage was a dead coachman whose skin was inside his skeleton. I lifted her into the seat, ran and bolted the door. Oh, she cried and cried, but I wouldn't let her out until she admitted my stomach was different from any other stomach in the world."

I listened to the story I was telling and the way I veered away from the truth at the last moment, unable to tell even the princess what had really happened.

"You were cruel even then. What a disgusting thing to do to a defenseless girl. Your mother should have whipped you."

"Oh, she did. She had the beadle do it, and he had a hand like iron. She was quite horrified." Mother wouldn't let a soul lift a finger against me, I was her jewel, her precious one.

"I'm glad I don't believe a word you're telling me, otherwise I couldn't possibly have you to dinner tonight."

My stomach was flaccid, yellow in the flickering torch light. Her hand explored the folds, tweezing, poking. She said, "It feels like my little sister Natalya's stomach. So buttery."

The taper was alive in my hand, nodding toward her thin frock, droplets of flame staining her skirts. I said, "Don't go so deep," shivering, but her sharp claws were searching, scratching. I watched the stains spread until they joined in a hoop of flame around her ankles and she screeched, running deeper into the barn, spinning in the layers of darkness.

I could see her completely for a moment, clothed in fire, capering wildly, a leaf bursting and curling in the updraft. I stood in the muffled barn without saying a word, waiting to see what would happen. After the cloth was scorched from her body I couldn't see her at all. But she screeched like a cat being mounted on a fence.

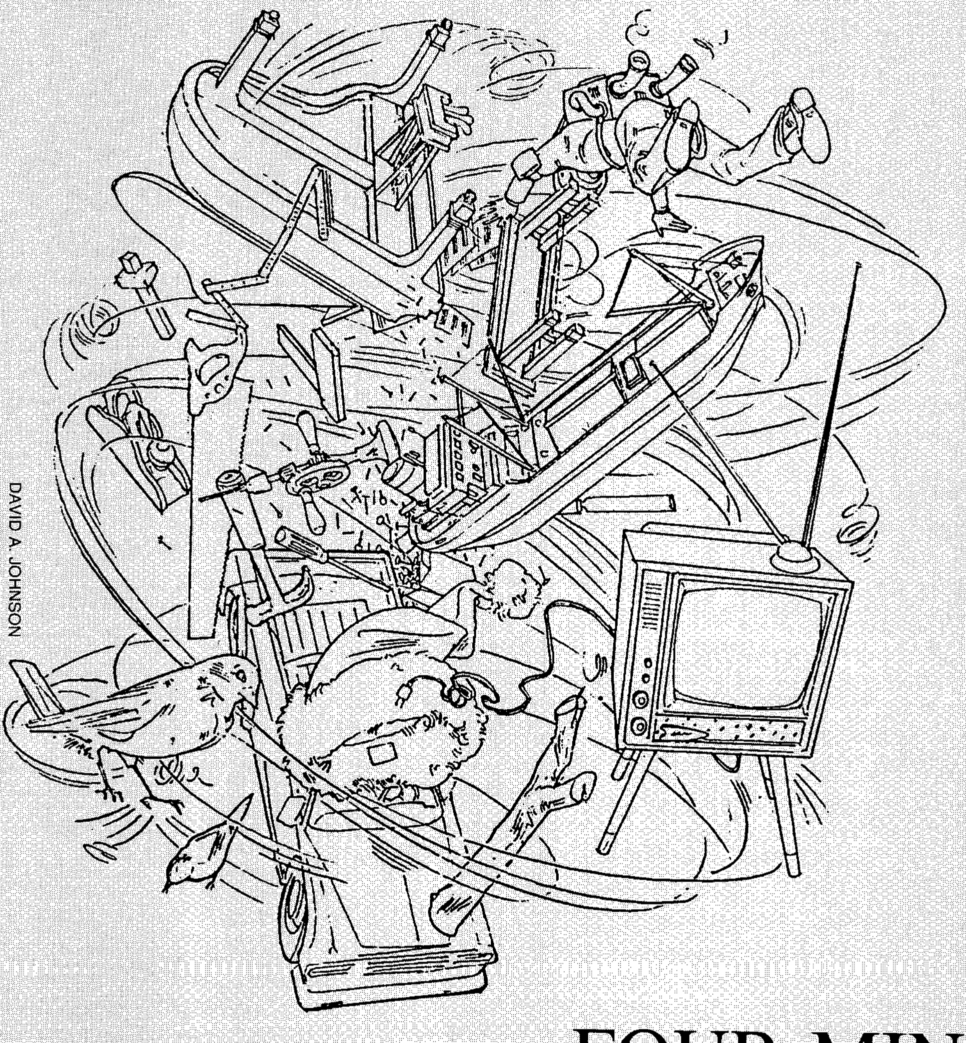
Mute, I walked into the yard and waited for the adults to come, my arms flat against my sides.

"I was at Ivanov's studio the other day. He's making marvelous progress with his 'Christ and the People,'" the princess said, gathering her things.

"'Christ Appearing to the People,'" I corrected.

"Yes, yes. Anyway, I was quite thrilled to see your likeness, you look quite spiritual—and a bit attractive too."

"It was kind of Ivanov, wasn't it?" Oh, I loved the painting, and especially my prominent place in it. But was I being too vain? ☐



DAVID A. JOHNSON

FOUR-MINUTE FICTIONS:

The Brevity Goes On

■

FIRST DAY

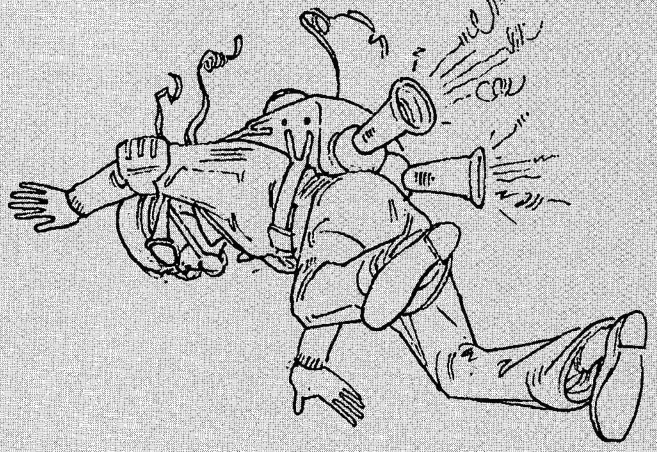
M.M. Stevenson

It was the first day of school for her youngest, who was awkward of foot. "Do be careful," she couldn't help saying, though she tried to sound matter of fact. She helped him on with his air pack.

"Let him fly between you at first," she said to her older two, who frowned and fretted to be off. They didn't mind the crowded air lanes, liked darting about to find holes to move forward in, delighted in taking chances.

She had watched, on their first days, from the parents' lane, fearful they would kill themselves or be killed by other careless children, but she wouldn't have been permitted to swoop down to discipline or save. Adults other than the traffic control weren't allowed in the children's lanes, no matter what.

She longed for the old days when her parents had driven her to school on the freeways—there was no other kind of street even then. Horrible accidents had been routine, it was true, and whole families wiped out, but at least they'd all been in it together. □



ETUDE

Jewel Mogan

"Kuss married his protégée," they said, implying something like incest.

Even at age twelve, for her it was black and white. When he walked onstage she burned. After intermission she would move from the cheap seats to the first row. She sat next to Margaret, his wife. While his wife watched him work, his student watched him sweat, down the temples; he sprayed sweat into the air with vehement jerks of his head. She was close enough to observe his fingering and every detail of his hands—even the sparse curling black hair on the outer rim of his right hand—the dynamic hand on view to the audience.

She and no one else heard his under-the-breath voicings and mutterings. His strong lean jaw moved in and out of midnight blue shadow. With small tight jerks of his head and forearms he restrained the beasts under the black lid. It was all black and white: the black orchestra. The white pages. The black Steinway. The white vest. The sharp black cutaway lapped limpid over the black stool. Where the tails divided, two large black buttons by which he seemed fastened together.

Her senses crossed over. She heard in black and white keys that she saw and felt under her fingers. The world was beautifully ordered for those precious hours. Once, as he received the ovation, turning his head and smiling, the white of an eye caught one of the spots and threw back a glint of light like starshine.

He was thirty-six then. She did not know, or care to know, his age. When they had studied together for a while, they became like father and daughter.

He was a tender father, cupping her chin: "*Ja ja, Ich liebe dich.* We'll try it again."

A proud father: "That was close to it! Olivia, you are a Strad in a world of fiddles!"

Or an angry father: "Damn it to hell, Olivia, why do you don't listen to the beat?"

At eighteen she still wore down her back the blonde rope that curled a little on the end as it tasseled over the edge of her green nylon rucksack.

"Can you hear the gathering storm? You look sudden and see the left side sawing their violins in half at the end of the Second Symphony. Oh, what balls! What balls! Ludwig von Balls Beethoven!"

They kidded around a lot after the lessons. Late one night he called her up to his stool, grabbed her hand, clapped a book into it—forcing it upon her—a book she said she hadn't time to read. Finally, she took it, went around the back of him, bent over and wrapped the braid around his collar.

"Kuss," she said. The spectrum pounded in their ears. He took off his shirt, rose awkwardly from the stool, and with his forgotten shirt still in his hand, pulled her down on top of him on the studio floor. Always, afterward, as they lay among the spent notes, he would tell her that they must be together forever.

He was as good as his word. Margaret wondered, for a time, mystified, how only the backs of his undershirts got so black, and so terribly black. After a time, he explained to her, as honorably as he could, what was happening.

Margaret had been his through selective breeding. They were each a product of generations of selective breeding. Now the line had stopped with him. They had no children. It was as though some ancient crone had cursed the house. Perhaps he was sterile. But no matter. The marriage in and of itself had not worked. Now the outlaw girl in jeans, bearing a rucksack—never to bear him a choice set of heirs—became his new wife.

He peaked at fifty. When he played, his fine nostrils flared to the impassioned jerks of his dark head and he snorted on the downbeat like a bull that is digging in. He reached beyond all stretch and flex of fingers for a sound he wanted that existed only in his head and he found it.

In her head as much as in her hands, she carried the repertoire on tour with him, as Margaret had done before her. She first braided her hair, beautiful as the hair of a Grimm princess, around the crown of her head. Then she had it cut and styled; then, over the years, as the road trips wore on, she had it cut again to a style she could shower and shake out.

She didn't practice with him anymore. It made him petulant. She seldom played. But she was always "supportive," as newsprint testified. She loved him more than ever. How would she not love him? But she saw a truth one evening in a Munich hotel mirror. His hair was snow.

"Kuss."

Her youth had re-ignited him. His age had made her less wild. But behind her and before her in the mirror she saw him, in black and white, not at all her lover, less and less her father, more and more her child. □

■

TWO FATHERS

Charis W. Conn

Still trembling, back from military school, a hint of slimness lurking beneath abused baby fat, Norman stands on the sunny Southern lawn, blinking. A head taller, his father stands beside him, rich-bellied, smoking a cigar, and smelling of the store—of Orange Crush and iodine and beer. He lifts his hand in a great gesture; an arc which takes in the sycamores, the twittering birds, the sun porch, and ends, triumphantly, at the space once empty beside the driveway. There, an apparition has been conjured from nowhere while Norman wept amidst soaked sheets and catcalls far off in Richmond: a gleaming white shack, the paint so shiny it seems still wet, with two windows and a little pitched roof with shingles that match the big house thirty feet away.

He cannot imagine what it is, though he senses that his father expects him to. It is a constant problem: his father gesturing, glancing, holding his cigar and his fat lips just so, and Norman failing to understand, to hop to, to jump to the appropriate conclusion. The year in military school was supposed to remedy this failure of his to grasp the world's rough indications and act on them.

In the sun, his father is pronouncing some incantation for which he should be grateful. Part of Norman's problem, he's been told, is that he does not listen. And talks too much.

"Boy," his father's profile regularly intones, each evening, from his cigar-scented, squeaking green leather chair. "Boy, you musta been inoculated with a phonograph needle."

So now he concentrates on listening, happy, after all, that it is Daddy's voice he is hearing rather than those steely strangers at the military school with their hard, upcountry accents. He has never felt quite at home with the rolling, Southern drawl of his family; his stuttering, his inability to say what he means always renders his speech staccato, shrill, somewhat hysterical. He can never speak slowly enough to suit his family. And their lazy tongues, the outlandish time they take to say nothing usually fills him with an impatience so great he feels terrified and ashamed. But now, his own home bright and near again at last, he basks in his father's molasses delivery.

"Nomun," he says, looking at the sky, a plume of smoke escaping with the syllables. "You had a tough yea', we all know that. You made a helluva lotta mistakes, but at least you had to fix 'em up yo'self. Yo' mamma and me are proud of you—even if you didn't zactly *shine* up there in Richmond."

His father smiles at his own little joke and takes a fortifying puff.

"An' in spite of all the expense, Ah think it was wuth it. And NOW . . ."

He draws it out. Here it comes, thinks Norman. He cannot tell if it is good or bad, but this little building before him must have something to do with it.

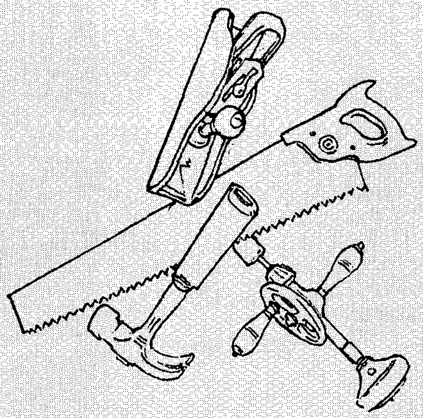
"An' now, we think we understand yo' limitations a little bettuh. I ain't sayin' we gonna make it easy fo' you. Just sayin' we think we know what you CAN and CANNOT do."

Norman is beginning to sweat in his itchy homecoming suit. He is thinking of Celia making their lunch in the kitchen, with a cold Pepsi Cola waiting for him. Celia usually only comes mornings, but today, his father told him in the car, she waited special just to see him come home. "Without pay," his father said.

His ears return to his father's voice and he hears:

"Mr. Ferris up to school tells me you're pretty good in that wood working shop they got up there. Says you make a pretty good carpenter some day. Pay's not bad. It's good honest work for a white boy."

He gets it. At least he thinks he does. And the shack begins to shine like an enormous, angelic cloud set feather-light on the damp grass. He can work in it! Be alone in it! He cannot believe his father would allow him such a luxury. Last summer, when he tried to knock together some two-by-fours in the backyard, his father pulled up in the car, got out, gave him a long look, and



said, "You smash yo' finguhs, I ain't takin' you to no hospital."

He doesn't hear any of the rest of his father's speech. His toes, caught like animals in the cruel traps of his polished shoes, inch him imperceptibly forward towards the small white door. It even has a keyhole! But he's certain there's no key. His room is the only one in the house without a latch because, his mother told him, "Daddy don't want you burnin' yo'self up in there. We don't want no trouble gettin' to you if we have to."

Finally, his back soaked, his eyes tearing from the sun, he finds himself following his father's bulging figure towards the shack. His father stands beside the door and says with a smile, "Now don't go wreckin' the place. It cost me a bundle," and departs, loping across the lawn and driveway, his legs unaccustomed to uneven ground and large spaces.

Norman stands before the door, real tears in his eyes. This thing, whatever it is, is his. There has been no mention made of Arnie, his older brother. But he can imagine that there will be fights over it. And the baby. Will his mother expect him to let the baby play here? He almost cannot bear to open the door, for fear it will contain—what? The local bully, ready to pounce on him? Or for fear that he has once again totally misunderstood his father, has made up the words about the wood shop and Mr. Ferris.

He opens the door a crack, not looking in. The smell of new wood and paint fills his body as if he were lying inside a gigantic flower whose overwhelming exotic scent was created just for him, matched exactly to his own physical chemistry. He glances back at the house. No one is watching him.

He opens the door and emits a high-pitched sound he hardly recognizes as his own.

The room is larger than he expected it to be, and immaculately white. Tables of heavy one-inch wood stand against each wall, seamlessly connecting to form a square U with the door at the open end. The walls on the right and left each hold a painted peg board stocked neatly with tools; beautiful gleaming metal and polished wood. On one table sits a flat type tray filled with screws and nails and bolts and nuts of every description. And on the furthest table lies a pile of sweet-smelling new lumber: two-by-twos, two-by-fours, planks and even dowels.

Without thinking, he finds that he has slammed the door behind him and now stands leaning against it, his feet wide apart. In the sealed, silent room, he can hear his heart. For an instant the thought flits through his mind that his father does not know what the shack contains; that it is some miracle that has duped his father into inadvertently setting him free.

He sits on the little bench before one of the tables. The air is stifling, intoxicatingly hot. His mind expands dreamily in the heat. In slow, deliberate motions he later cannot remember, he stands, removes his fountain pen from his breast pocket, and begins to meticulously trace the outlines of all the tools as they hang on the white peg board, carefully avoiding the holes. To keep it steady, he holds each tool firmly with one hand, longing to remove it from its hook, caress it, see what it will do, but restricting himself to his purpose. His lines are even and deep and blue-black, the sharp nib of the pen making a satisfying dent in the paint. When he is done, and has blown them dry, he can close his eyes, run his fingers over the lines he has made, and actually feel the delicate incision.

Without thinking, he walks to the back, lifts a blonde plank from the pile of new wood, carries it to the bench and lays it down. Without searching, his fingers find the hand saw and the heavy right angle. Bending his back and neck over the wood until it hurts, he carefully draws a blue-black line across the center of the plank. Again, that delicate sinking of the nib into the clean, virgin surface. He presses his knee to the wood and drags the blade across it, a hair's breadth to the right of the line he has drawn. When the wood clatters to the floor, he puts the spare piece back on the pile and sets his newly-cut square of wood on the table.

Hunched forward on the bench, his tongue between his lips, his eyebrows already full of sawdust, he measures out his message and scrapes the words into the wood, ever so lightly, with the tip of a tiny nail. With an infinite patience he has preserved for this moment, he hammers small nail holes along the lines he has scraped until the words KEEP OUT are emblazoned across the top of the plank. Below them, in lines of nail holes, a skull and crossbones glares fiercely.

Still in his sweat-soaked suit jacket, he takes the sign to the door and with the finality of a coffin maker, he beats the longest nail he can find through the plank and into the clean white of the newly painted wood. □

■

A FIRE IN THE BOX THAT COULD TRULY LIGHT THE WORLD

William Keisling

It was this box in one corner of the living room. It was a square box, about the size of a doll house, but its top was flat and it was supported by four cylindrical legs fastened to the bottom at each corner. The grownups would sit in chairs for hours watching the box and listening to a voice that came from somewhere inside.

The memories of Peter Paul Stoken start with the box. The earliest thing he could remember was being held in the arms of one of the grownups, sitting in one of the big chairs, looking at the box. It was very curious, that box.

The box had a picture in its front, like the pictures on the wall, except it moved. It was more like a window. A wavy blue gray window on the world. Peter Paul Stoken's mother or his father would get up from the chair and turn a little clicker at the side of the box and the picture would change. The picture would get all fuzzy, the voice would go away, replaced by the most frightening hiss, then a new picture would come on and a new voice would fill the room. There was a pair of shiny sticks at the top of the box and sometimes Peter Paul Stoken's father would have to fuss with the sticks, pointing them this way or that, sometimes cursing, more often than not pounding on the side of the box before the picture would appear clearly, without fuzz or waves, and then his father would sit back down in the chair, watching and listening to the box.

Some days Peter Paul Stoken's father would have friends over to the house and they would all sit down in front of the box, yelling and screaming and drinking a frothy, bitter tasting liquid from cans. Sometimes Peter Paul Stoken would crawl around the floor, lifting a can to his mouth. He would make a face, white suds would drip from his tiny lips and the men would laugh. Then his mother would come into the room, pick up little Peter Paul Stoken and say, "What are you men doing? Letting my baby drink!" and the men would laugh some more. Peter Paul Stoken liked it when the men came over to watch the box.

Sometimes when Peter Paul Stoken was crawling around the floor, bouncing with ecstasy on his hands and knees, he would be drawn to the box. He would stand himself up in front of the box and turn the little clicker.

"Hey! Where's the picture?" one of the men would yell.

"We're missing the game!"

His father would pick him up then and carry him into the next room and set him behind the bars, where Peter Paul Stoken couldn't get out, where he would cry himself to sleep. He didn't like those bars. Sometimes, if he cried long enough, his mother would come in and lift him from behind the bars. She would lower him to the floor where he'd again crawl freely, or maybe she would carry him into another room and lie with him and sing softly to him on her big wide bed. Sometimes she would kiss him and rub his nose with hers and say, "Mama. Say Mama."

Peter Paul Stoken would laugh and bounce up and down, pushing on the bed with his feet and arching his back and maybe clapping his hands. Sometimes his mother would touch his chin with her finger and say, "You're Peter Paul Stoken. Say Peter Paul," and he would like this even more. After this had been going on for some time he would try to mimic the sound his mother made.

"Pul," he would say, and this would make his mother very happy.

She would kiss him then and beam, "Yes, you're Paul! Now say Mama! *Please!*"

Soon everyone was calling him Paul, except his father, who liked calling him Pauley. His father would sit with him in the chair in front of the box and say, "Pauley, say Dada. Make your old man happy. Say Dada."

Before long Paul Stoken learned there were names for everyone. There was Mama and Dada. The two funny looking people who always looked happy were Gramma and Grampa Pervis. The two funny looking people who always looked angry were Gramma and Grampa Stoken. Best of all there was his Uncle Jeffrey Stoken.

Uncle Jeffrey sometimes would come over to the house and take Paul Stoken for rides in the stroller, pushing him at breakneck speed down the sidewalk. Or maybe he would take Paul Stoken by the hand and say, "Come on, Paul. Let's see you walk."

Every now and then Uncle Jeffrey would race into the house and pick up Paul Stoken, even if he was behind the bars, and take him into the living room and hold him in front of the box with the moving picture.

Mama would come into the room then and say, "Jeff, what on earth are you doing? He's too young to understand the television."

"This is an important day in history," Uncle Jeff would say. "The first Catholic president! When Paul grows up he'll be able to say he saw Kennedy's inauguration."

"He won't remember a thing!" Mama would say, staring at the boy who sat transfixed before the flickering blue tube.

But always he would remember bits and pieces. He would remember that day sitting in front of the box with Uncle Jeffrey when a man called Kennedy put one hand on a book and raised his other hand into the air. But Mama was right. He couldn't understand much of it.

Some things were easier to understand. One day Uncle Jeffrey ran in and held Paul Stoken up in front of the box and there was a picture of a big cigar, standing on its end and smoking at the bottom. "T-minus ten, nine, eight, seven. . . ." White smoke would bellow out from the bottom of the cigar and it would rise straight into the air. Uncle Jeffrey would throw Paul Stoken into the air. "This is an exciting time to be alive, Paul," Uncle Jeffrey used to tell him. "Really it is. Maybe someday you and me can take a rocket to the stars. Would you like that?"

"Yeah!" Paul Stoken would say.

When Paul Stoken got a little bigger he figured out how to crawl over the bars. He learned how to take the screws out of his crib and the whole thing would come crashing noisily down to the floor. Some mornings, when no one else was awake, he'd crawl over the bars and go into the living room and turn on the box in the corner. He got good at turning the clicker and fussing with the shiny sticks at the top. After awhile he could always get a good picture. The first show early in the morning was some nonsensical thing called the Farm Report. The man on the show always said things like "livestock prices yesterday were down." How dull! Then came the news (even more boring). Finally, after much waiting, Paul Stoken's favorite show would come on. He would hear the happy jingling sound, he would hear the music, and there would be old Captain Kangaroo jingling the keys to the Treasure House. What was in store for today? Would Mr. Greenjeans have a new invention? Would Mr. Moose drop ping-pong balls on the Captain or would Bunny Rabbit steal a nice bunch of Kangaroo's carrots? Now *there* was something to think about!

One morning, while he was waiting for Captain Kangaroo to come on, there was a picture of Kennedy giving a speech. "The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it—and the glow from that fire can truly light the world," Kennedy was saying. Paul Stoken liked the idea of a fire that could light the world though he couldn't comprehend it. Once he'd seen a huge bonfire in Mason City after the football team had won, when everyone threw tables and chairs into the flames and screamed insanely, but the fire, even at its brightest, had lit no more than a few blocks of Mason City. He couldn't imagine a fire that could light the world.

The next Sunday, by coincidence, Grampa and Gramma Stoken and Uncle Jeffrey came over for supper and they all talked about this man called Kennedy. While he made a hole in his mashed potatoes for the gravy Paul Stoken tried to listen to the conversation.

"I think the Peace Corps is a great idea," Jeffrey Stoken said. "There won't be any more wars. Why, we'll use our troops to bring food and medicine to the needy all over the world."

"Don't you believe it for a minute," Grampa Stoken said. He was dressed in his Sunday clothes and Gramma Stoken was standing behind him, holding his necktie over his shoulder so he could carve the roast beef. "There'll always be wars so long as there's commies. Like this here Castro fella down in Cuba. Almost blows us all to Kingdom Come over some missiles. As for me, I think Kennedy's a fine Catholic young man, but I don't take no stock in this Peace Corps talk. It's hogwash, like the talk you hear nowdays about flying a man to the moon. It'll never happen in my lifetime or yours, Jeff."

"I don't know, Dad," Paul Stoken's father said. "I'm kind of caught up in Kennedy's optimism. Right now we're living in the richest country in the world. I ask myself, Should we live high off the hog or should we try to help those less fortunate than us? I think Kennedy's going in the right direction myself. Like he said, we can build a fire that can light the world."

There was that phrase again. Paul Stoken pricked up his ears.

"You two are young yet," Grampa Stoken said, dismissing Paul Stoken's father and uncle with a wave of the carving knife. He laid a juicy cut of meat on a plate. "So's Kennedy, for that matter. Like I said, I think he's a fine Catholic boy—I'm not talking against him on that—but he's young, and so are you boys. When you get a little older you'll start to see things different. You'll start to see the world don't want us going around lighting fires. I saw that in Korea, for myself. One of these days we're going to light one fire too many and it'll be the death of us. Mark my words."

After supper Paul Stoken sat in front of the fireplace with Uncle Jeffrey. They were roasting chestnuts over the flames.

"How can you build a fire to light the world?" Paul Stoken asked.

"You mean like in Kennedy's speech?"

Paul Stoken nodded.

"It's not a fire that you can see," Uncle Jeffrey tried to explain, fumbling for words. "It's not a fire like the one in this fireplace. It's an invisible fire, one that warms your heart, not your hearth. Grampa Stoken doesn't think that's a very practical sort of fire, but don't listen to him."

But not long after that everything changed and Paul Stoken was left to wonder if his grandfather hadn't been right after all. It happened one day when Paul Stoken was out in the yard playing with one of the kids in the neighborhood. The mother of the child came out with tears in her eyes and called the boy. Paul Stoken went home then too. He found his mother crying in the living room. She was watching the box.

For several days after that the family sat together watching the box in the living room. No matter how much Mr. Stoken fussed with the shiny sticks or pounded on its side he couldn't get it to play happy pictures.

There were pictures of a woman in a black dress with children walking down a broad street. Pictures of a riderless horse with boots in the stirrups pointing backwards. Pictures of a flag folded by soldiers. Pictures of a solitary flame burning in the middle of a field.

After that the family continued spending many hours watching the box in the corner of the living room but now their eyes seemed somehow glassier, as if they could not see so clearly anymore. After that Grampa and Gramma Stoken and Uncle Jeffrey still came over for supper on Sundays, and they would still talk about politics, but never again did Paul Stoken hear them talk about building a fire that could truly light the world. □

WELCOME SIGNS

James Tate

Ever since her return home from the hospital, Mrs. Norris found herself taking extreme delight in the observation of birds and other little creatures that visited her yard. The goldfinch that perched on her bed of daisies each morning and early evening nabbing small insects brightened her spirits and helped her to forget her still-nagging pain. And the day a scarlet tanager flittered from tree to tree in plain view of her kitchen window Mrs. Norris felt no pain at all. It was heaven-sent, as bright and shining as hope itself.

She called to her only daughter, Susie, to come quick.

"He's come to visit us all the way from Peru. Look, Susie, he's our first scarlet tanager. Have you ever seen anything redder than that?"

Susie had pouted in her room the whole time Mrs. Norris was hospitalized, and was now sensitive to any change she sensed in her mother.

"He changes color in the autumn. He doesn't want to be seen in the winter wearing that bright red coat of feathers. Isn't he smart?"

Susie pulled away from her mother's arms and clutched her doll.

When Mr. Norris came home from work at five, Mrs. Norris told him about the visitation of the tanager. Mr. Norris did not know what a tanager was, but was happy she had had a good day.

"What's for dinner?" he asked, as always, pleased that a semblance of the old routine was returning.

"Fish and corn-on-the-cob. Did you have a good day? Did Garrett get his report in on time?"

"Oh, you know Garrett. It was on time, but I think he made up some of the figures. His mind's on baseball this time of year. The rest is just going through the motions. Lydia does a pretty good job of covering for him." Mr. Norris picked up the newspaper and scanned the front page. "They say it's going to rain tomorrow."

"I saw the skunk again last night, Clifford, after you went to bed. He's not afraid of me. I was standing five feet from him for the longest time. I followed him around the yard with the flashlight. I think he would have let me pet him, really. He's beautiful."

"You better watch yourself. You get yourself sprayed and you'll be sleeping in the tent for the rest of the summer."

Susie, who was playing in her room, thought it strange that her mother should follow a skunk around the yard late at night. She hoped nobody else would find out. She was certain nobody else's mother had ever done such a disgusting thing. A skunk, p.u.

"By the way," Mr. Norris said, "I've invited the Cummings over for dinner on Saturday. Are you up to it? They've been asking about you and I thought it might be good for you. Okay?"

"I'm sure I'll manage." But, in truth, Mrs. Norris wished her family wasn't in such a hurry to get back to normal. She liked living in the twilight world with furry and feathery friends. The family of wrens in the birdhouse on the front-porch was more riveting to her now than all the dinner-guests she had ever cooked for in the past. Their little ones were about to fly from the nest any day now and she didn't want to miss the event. She had witnessed many families raise their chicks in that house, but this year it was especially important to her that all go well.

After dinner Susie asked permission to go across the street to play with her friend Tamika. Mrs. Norris cleaned the dishes while Mr. Norris puttered with a table he was making in the basement.

She saw something moving on the edge of the woods that abutted their property. It was something large and unfamiliar and she called to Mr. Norris in the basement. "Come here, Cliff. There's an ostrich out here. Come see!"

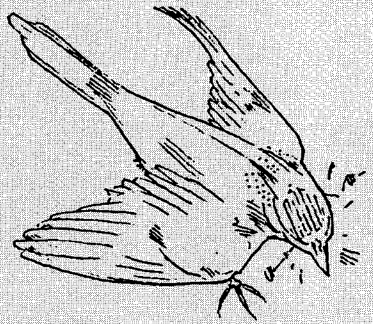
"What the hell are you yelling about? I can't hear you." She was always yelling at him when he was working in the basement. It was one thing that had annoyed him for years, and that hadn't changed.

"An ostrich, there's an ostrich in the woods."

"Are you out of your mind, woman?" Reluctantly he put down his tools and climbed the steps to the kitchen. "Now what is it?"

"Here, look." She handed him the binoculars that she seemed to carry everywhere since she had gotten back.

"By God, it's a wild turkey. Well isn't that something. That's the first time I've seen one of those since we've lived here."



The huge bird could have been mistaken for a small ostrich, he had to grant her that. And now that he thought about it, it was pretty funny.

"An ostrich," he chuckled. "You'll be seeing elephants soon." And then he returned to the basement.

The sun was setting as Mrs. Norris finished the dishes and polished the counter. It was going to be a beautiful sunset, the air had a slight chill to it, her favorite weather.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" she shouted down the stairs at Mr. Norris.

"What? What is it you want now?"

"I said, do you want to go for a walk? Just a short one while Susie is at the Smiths?"

"I want to finish the table tonight. You go on, maybe I'll catch up with you."

The sky in the west was pink and lavender and shot through with drifting tangerine islands. Mrs. Norris walked the road with a sense of purpose, knowing the best vantage-point from which to view the final sinking of the sun. It was a meadow, just twenty minutes by foot from her home. A single, dappled grey horse grazed there through all the seasons of the year, and today she positioned herself so that the sun would set directly in back of the horse. She had no name for the beast, but she was fond of him, especially now. He stared at her and whisked his tail back and forth, scattering flies.

When there was nothing left but a faint orange glow on the horizon, Mrs. Norris turned and continued her walk in the other direction. She was sorry Mr. Norris had not joined her. They had walked together in the evenings for many years, but then he began to find excuses. And Susie was afraid of the dark.

A slight breeze rippled the silvery birch leaves. The grim and tedious weeks in the hospital drifted through her mind like a half-forgotten dream. She would breathe this air, here, now, and be grateful to be alive. She winked at the little bunny watching her from crazy, old Mrs. Parks' vegetable garden.

Mrs. Parks' two goats leaned their heads over their wooden fence and neighed greeting to her as she passed. She stopped to pat their heads and scratch their noses. "What a funny world we live in," she said to them, half-expecting some form of agreement from them, and then getting it.

When she returned from her walk, Mr. Norris was propped up in bed reading a mystery novel. "I wish you would have come," she said to him, situating herself on the edge of the bed beside him. "The sunset was gorgeous, and I had the funniest thing happen."

"Yes," he said, lowering his reading glasses.

"It was just down at the corner. I was walking along and I spotted a little field mouse by the side of the road. The moon was very bright or I wouldn't have seen him at all."

"A mouse, yes. You spotted a mouse."

"Yes, and it was munching on something, I could see that. And it was sitting up munching on something."

"Yes. Quite fascinating. Go on."

"Well, you see, it looked right at me and didn't seem to be afraid one bit."

"Yes."

"And, well, I decided to try to get closer to him."

"You wanted to get close to this mouse, have I got this right?"

"And so I got down on my hands and knees and started crawling toward him."

"This is quite a story, if you don't mind my saying so. Most women are terrified of mice, and my wife is crawling toward one on her hands and knees in the gravel."

"And, Clifford, you wouldn't believe it. I put my face within inches of his and he wasn't in the least nervous. He just kept munching on what turned-out to be a dried worm, very sandy, I would think. And I crouched like that for fifteen minutes, just watching him. He was the cutest thing I've ever seen in my life. His tiny little paws washing his face between bites, and his tiny pointed nose, his whiskers and eyes and ears. Really, I was completely enchanted by this little fellow."

"Well, I'm speechless, Winnie. That's quite a story. Meanwhile, Susie was wondering where you were. I put her to bed, but she's upset about something. Tamika hit her or something. Anyway, it appears they had some kind of fight or other. You had better go say goodnight to her."

Mrs. Norris agreed.

The next afternoon Mr. Norris called Bill Cummings from the office to cancel the dinner they had planned on Saturday.

"I don't think Winnie is up to it yet," he explained. "She's still a bit fragile." ☐

WAYS TO SKIN A CAT

Daniel Wallace

It was the first thing his son ever learned that proved to be of any real value to the father.

"Ready?" he said. He held a stick in his hand, a small one. "This is going to be a long one," he said. The boy nodded, but he never took his eyes away from the stick. "Okay . . . go!"

The father heaved the stick across the yard. The boy watched it arc and tumble through the air, following it with his feet, and was almost under it when it hit the ground near the shrubbery. He picked it up and trotted back to his father.

"Good boy," his father said. "Good boy. Ready for another?"

The father had some friends over for a barbeque, but they had all left their sons at home. The boy sat at his father's feet, smiling, and he never said a word.

"Nice looking kid you've got there, Charlie," said a friend.

"Yeah," said another. "Is he smart?"

"Smart?" Charlie said. "*Smart*? Watch this."

He went to the woodpile and found a respectable stick. He slapped the palm of his hand with it a couple of times, grinning at his friends, and when he snapped his fingers the boy jumped to his feet.

"Ready?" said the father. The boy nodded. Everybody was quiet. The father threw the stick about fifteen yards. It went past the shrubbery, through the branches of a pine tree, and it landed in the creek. The boy raced after it. It looked like a difficult throw, but it was a throw they'd been practicing and the boy had no trouble with it.

"That's incredible," said the friend. "How long did it take for you to teach him?"

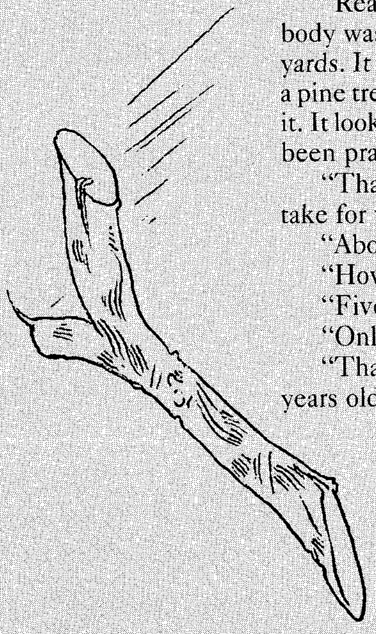
"About a week," said Charlie.

"How old is he?"

"Five," said the father.

"Only five?"

"That's right," he said, rubbing his son's head. "Five years old."



"Incredible," said the friend. "Really, really incredible."

"Thanks," said the father. "Wanna see another?"

The boy grew quickly. He learned many things. He learned how to make his father a drink, to bring in the paper. He learned how to change the channels on the television set. Fetching was no longer a challenge. He learned how to match his father's socks—a trick even the wife had never mastered. He was obviously quite brilliant. The father sent the wife away. The son learned how to preheat the oven, make beds, clean house, rake the yard. All this he did to absolute perfection. Occasionally, for old time's sake, he and his father would go out back and fetch a stick or two. It was nostalgic. "How you've grown!" his father often said, and it was true. The boy had grown. He was huge. He had arms as big as logs and muscles in his legs that flexed could rip a pair of brand new jeans. A good-looking boy, he was only sixteen.

But one day he came down with a very bad cold. It was the first time he had ever been sick in his life. This surprised and confused his father. He tried to get his son out of bed but he couldn't. The boy groaned and rolled over. And he did have a fever, his father could feel it, but it wasn't that bad. It wasn't that bad at all.

"Stay in bed for a while," the father said. "And when you get up be sure not to forget to read my List of Things To Do I left for you in the kitchen."

On the list were many things. The yard needed to be mowed, weeded and raked. The house needed a new coat of paint, the roof new shingles. The old elm that was dying needed to be cut down before it fell, and there were many other smaller things to do which the son had to do everyday but that the father thought he'd write down just for the hell of it.

So he left for work, certain these things would get done. But that evening, many hours later, he came home and saw that the yard was looking just as bad as it had that morning, that the house had been neither painted nor reshingled, and that the elm was still leaning precariously to the right.

Inside was worse. The house was a mess. Not a dish had been done, nor a bed made, and his drink—the one his son always left in the foyer at the bottom of the bannister so it would be there and ready to drink the moment he got home—well, it was simply not there.

So the father climbed the stairs to his son's room, one heavy step at a time, and there, in bed, he was, his son, just as he had left him that morning. The son's large brown eyes peered at the father over the edge of his blanket.

"So," said the father. "Been here all day, have you?"

The boy nodded.

"Haven't moved from the bed, have you?"

The boy shook his head.

"Well," the father said. "Well well. That's great. That's just fine and dandy."

The father spent a moment in deep thought. This was the first time the boy, his son, had ever disobeyed him—it was a crucial moment in both their lives. If he got away with it this time . . . The father thought of inches, of miles. Some sort of discipline was in order here. A line had to be drawn. But he couldn't spank the child. He knew that. The boy was simply too large, and the father was genuinely afraid his son might retaliate. But he knew another way to go about teaching a lesson. He knew.

He shook his head and smiled a sad one.

"Worthless," he whispered. "Absolutely worthless." He sighed. "Did you know that? Did you know that you were worthless? That you're not worth a penny? That I wouldn't pay a penny for you? That at a penny you'd be overpriced?" Gradually his voice grew louder and louder. "Did you know that? Well, did you? Well? So? What do you have to say for yourself? What? Let's hear it. I want to hear it, please. *Please.* I want you to give me a reason I should excuse this inexcusable behavior—though I can tell you now, right now, that there is no excuse, no excuse whatsoever. But maybe you think there is one, and if you do I'd like to hear about it. Maybe you think you know something I don't and there's an excuse for what is absolutely inexcusable, unforgivable behavior. So tell me. The floor is yours. What do you have to say for yourself?"

He waited. He crossed his arms, closed his mouth and waited for his son's reply. For a long time the father and the son stared into each other's eyes. For a long, long time.

It was then that he remembered—that the father remembered—the boy had never learned to talk. No one had ever taught him.

Just as well, he thought, sitting down beside him now, smiling kindly, rubbing his head, feeling his son's fever. No telling what he might say. □

WAR STORY

Kate McCorkle

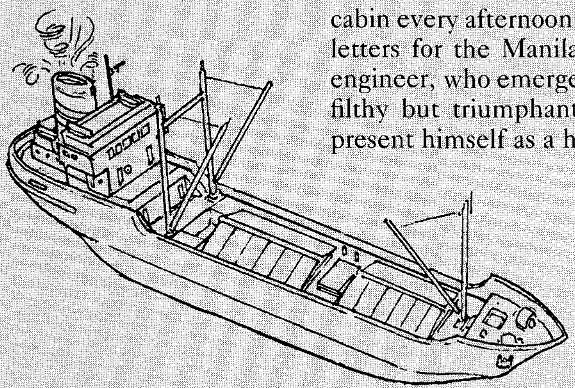
The freighter was old and slow. It took seventeen days to make Manila from San Francisco. It should have taken eight.

The engine stopped three times in the middle of the Pacific. Each time young Paula Adams looked up from her book or was distracted from her hand of cards. It was as if the blood paused in her veins. She would go on deck to find the ship cut loose like a kite, tumbling slowly up the dark surface of the sea. Andrew would not be safe in the war until she was with him. She believed nothing could happen to him, not if he was right under her eyes.

She would stand on the hot deck or lie down in the cool of her cabin. But she would not read or eat until the engine started.

(By refusing to eat she would get herself manifested on a cargo plane and sit with the crew under its wing on a Saigon runway. Boys with eyes large in their shaven heads, waiting, taking shy looks at her hair, her knees, smiling; and under the roar of the engines, mouthing magical far-away syllables, O-hi-o, Vir-gin-ia.)

It did not, of course, make any difference to the other passengers how long it took to get anywhere. That was the beauty of freighter travel. Mrs. Weaver, who was on her third trip around the world, was turning the heel on a pair of socks. Now they would be ready for Mr. Weaver to wear in Manila. Mr. Youngling, who disappeared into his cabin every afternoon to "correspond," would have more letters for the Manila post. And the young Norwegian engineer, who emerged from these bouts with his engine filthy but triumphant, had yet another opportunity to present himself as a hero to young Mrs. Adams.



Yet the effect of engine trouble on Paula had its impact. Something prompted her fellow passengers to pause in their idleness and remark to no one in particular, "Young Mrs. Adams is going to Vietnam to be with her husband." Before their eyes she became daily younger, paler, blonder; her clothes more unsuitably Mod and American. Her skin remained clear. When the engine stopped she refused all distraction.

Furthermore she would have nothing to do with the engineer. This was a disappointment to Mrs. Weaver, who longed to make a match. He sent gifts to Paula's cabin. She refused them. You could keep the dress, suggested Mrs. Weaver, her little eyes greedy, and refuse him anyway. But no; the slightest unfaithfulness would break the thread of Andrew's safety. Paula did not bother to explain. She merely looked at the dress with its Philippine embroidery and said she would never be happy in it. Mrs. Weaver was thrilled.

(She would dance with a dangerous Lieutenant Colonel in rolled-up sleeves, who said nothing under the barbed-wire stars, but held her palm open with his moving thumb. The boys danced without hearing the music, shuffled and talked with the jungle in their eyes. They had sisters. They had buddies. They apologized for their language.)

Many kindnesses were done her. In Manila she went everywhere as a guest of the Weavers. She was seen shimmering along in the heat, a pale shape floating behind the strident figure of Mrs. Weaver, in and out of the dark pillars of the main post. She was seen in the black limousine climbing through cane fields up the side of the Taal Volcano. She was heard declining to discuss politics with Mr. Weaver, who turned red and said she'd damn well better *get* interested. She was spotted eating shrimps in Cavite province; young Mrs. Adams, charming, pale, and polite; set apart by destiny.

Perhaps everyone grew tired of escorting destiny, for Hong Kong was declared safe for a young woman and Paula was left to her own devices. She found she hadn't any. The tour book with its careful underlinings remained in her cabin. She wandered.

The ship was tethered on a long rope Kowloon side, and sometimes she did not cross over to Hong Kong proper at all, but walked slowly in the sulfurous heat peering into narrow shops, drawn by the dim gleam of brass, the scent of jasmine flowers drying on a tea seller's floor. In this quarter she went strangely unnoticed, as if her inability to understand anything that was said made her invisible as well. Nothing in the broil of noise touched the inner silence where her one thought ran continuously: let Andrew be safe, let him be safe.

On her last day in Hong Kong she got lost. Standing on a crumbling corner she braced herself against the flow of traffic and asked anyone who would stop how to get to the docks. Her voice left her like a blown leaf. The words repeated over and over to uncomprehending listeners began to sound like nonsense. At last an old woman took Paula by the wrist and led her to a policeman who spoke English. But the damage was done. Paula had accepted her own language as gibberish.

When the ship appeared, shining out of the dusk, she could see her fellow passengers high up, a black clump riveted to the rail by her slow progress along the quay. They did not wave back.

The ship's engine stopped once more, in the night this time, between Hong Kong and Bangkok. Paula knelt on the very prow of the ship, knelt on the hard deck with her one thought, and kneeling saw how limpid the water with its curl of salt had grown, how the fish had sprouted wings. A soft, salty wind blew around her and the fish flew up and beached themselves at her side, helpless as any fish out of water.

(And so the men would gather to drink and tell stories against the night, loud enough to drown the distant flares. There would be nothing for a woman but to slip out into the deep dust of the curfewed street, to lift her nightgown and run from shadow to shadow. To stand by the moonlit crater of a house and hear the sole survivor's story . . . only gone out for potatoes and when she came back . . . Tears and dust.)

After a while Paula came out of the dark, the hum of the patched engine in the soles of her feet, and appeared shining at the door of the lounge. She smiled at the edgy little group. Mr. Weaver was annoyed by the glow. He did not like the air of transcendence with which this young woman ate cookies. He left off complaining about the tepid coffee long enough to exclaim, "God help the war!" □

■

SANTA CLAUS

Ruth Yunker

That was the year I bought all my children's Christmas presents at the grocery store. I'd decided on frozen pizza for Christmas dinner, and I didn't object when my daughter wore her tattered play clothes to Midnight Mass. I was sullen and depressed. Newly divorced. An unattractive state. Early Christmas morning found me glaring at my lopsided tree, nursing a warm beer. It was two-thirty in the morning. A year before I'd been at my sparkling best, and now my gaze was frozen on the wilted carrots my bedazzled children had put out for Santa's reindeer.

Suddenly a snowy breeze whipped through the chimney and burst into the living room. I grabbed my faded robe more closely about me, but before I had time to form a coherent thought, Santa Claus fell down the chimney, stepped into the dim room, picked me up out of my chair, and made love to me.

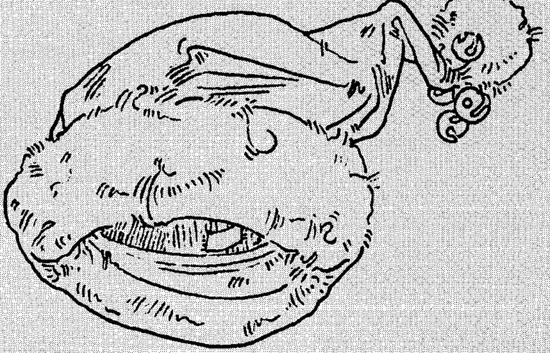
Santa was a woman.

"What the—"

"Shh," whispered Santa.

"But I—" My throat closed as Santa's smooth hand pushed back my bathrobe and began to caress my body. I inhaled sharply as Santa removed that red velvet suit, and I saw that she was a woman of such statuesque proportions, I wondered how she'd kept the universe fooled all these years.

"I do it with mirrors," she whispered into my tingling ear. "I keep little bunnies, bouquets of paper flowers, a large cane, and a sequined assistant, and nobody suspects



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a thing." Her hand stroked my breasts, drew a circle around my navel, and I suddenly remembered Mrs. Claus.

"Mrs. Claus and I have an arrangement," Santa read my mind. "I don't ask her about her yearly jaunt to Monte Carlo, and she doesn't ask me about Christmas Eve." Santa leaned over and kissed me. She smelled of pine cones and oranges.

"And the elves?" I whispered. I was absolutely bewildered. I was absolutely confused. I was absolutely aroused. Santa had the most beautiful mouth in the world. Her hand slid down to my pubic hair and fondled it, braided it between her fingers, and pulled gently. My tilted Christmas tree now blazed before my eyes, glittering, and Santa found my clitoris. She massaged it gently but insistently, and brought me to an overwhelming orgasm. I must have been dreaming.

"You're not dreaming," Santa whispered. "This is not a dream. You are beautiful, and you smell like children and toothpaste. I love the smell of toothpaste."

"Are you really Santa Claus? Do you have an age?" I asked, staring at her. She was majestic. She was glistening. Her white braid was shining.

"I don't have an age, really, although lately I've started a bit of an exercise program and cut down on red meat—"

"Spare me," I dared to interrupt.

"Believe then. It's all true. Ever since 1856."

"1856 . . . ?"

"Mrs. Claus's idea, though. She loves little children and big parties."

"You're unbelievably smooth," I murmured now, running my hand carefully up and down her body.

"Loofah mitt and salt rubdowns. I also believe in regular massages and mega-doses of vitamins. For everyone. For you." Santa kissed me softly. Then she gave me a massage, trimmed my hair and toenails, and instructed me in basic yoga stretches.

"But . . . but why—"

"But why am I here?"

I nodded.

"I have an exquisitely intricate and efficient network of spying elves, and your name came up. Your wanton indulgence of despair stood out in blatant contrast to your more usual wanton indulgence of joy. A challenge I couldn't resist."

"Do you do this for everyone?"

"Time limits. Naturally I'm selective."

I hung my head. "Thank you," I whispered.

"More than my pleasure." Santa stood up and arranged her red suit. It was lined in yellow satin and the cap was topped by a rainbow of crystal stars.

"Will I ever see you again?" Suddenly I was close to tears.

"Don't be childish." She ran her finger lightly down my nose, then reached into her voluminous bag and pulled out a pair of red suede boots with slender wooden heels, and a box of sugar plums. She handed these to me with a flourish, and adjusted her beard.

"Don't go," I cried out in a panic.

"Don't be selfish," she said.

"But I'm in love with you." I hugged the boots to my chest.

"So is the universe, my sweet. So are all the children in the world, and all the puppies and kittens." Again she reached into her bag, and this time pulled out several glossy packages with my children's names on them.

"I have to go, I really do. Lots still to be done before dawn. Your hair looks lovely. Don't forget to condition it. Cider vinegar will bring out the highlights. Put extra cheese on that pizza, at least. Fall in love with yourself, and rejoin happiness."

She turned towards the fireplace, and I saw her eyes fall on the shriveled carrots. She shuddered. "Next year," she said over her shoulder, her eyes meeting mine, "leave me cookies. Anything with raspberry jam. Forget the carrots. The reindeer fly on an empty stomach." Then Santa flashed me a beatific smile, executed a slow and sultry wink, and disappeared up the chimney. My living room was suddenly as fragrant as a pine forest, as cosy as a feather bed, and as luminous as Santa had been.

I bent down to retrieve my bathrobe, and sank back into the easy chair, my body still tingling, my mind still whirling. I remained in that chair all night.

The next morning I put on the red suede boots. My children shrieked over the gifts. And when I put extra cheese on the pizza, I smelled pine cones and oranges. □

■

AT ABU ALI

Alison Moore

It is late summer in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia. Iran and Iraq are declaring a *jihad*, a holy war on each other and on the day the missiles begin to rip through the air we think about being in the water. We think about swimming, pretending we're somewhere other than the Middle East for an afternoon. We drive to find a beach at Abu Ali.

Giff and Ardelle sit in the front of the pickup, Dennis and Bob and I ride in the back. The little sliding window at the back of the cab is open so we can all hear the classical music hour from Radio Bahrain. Beethoven urges us forward and we leave a plume of dust behind.

We can't get away fast enough, out of Jubail and the industrial project where the men work endless hours trying to carry out the erratic whims of the Saudi Royal Commission. As women in an Islamic country, Ardelle and I struggle to find ways to fill our time. We are forbidden to work, to drive a car, even to sit on the seat of a bicycle. We walk to the commissary in 125-degree heat with 100% humidity in long-sleeved, full-length kaftans, thankful at least not to be veiled. At Abu Ali we will be almost naked in bathing suits, visible if only for an afternoon and very nearly free.

We are stopped at a barricade on the narrow causeway to the island. A teenaged Saudi soldier sits slouched on a tall stool in the tiny guard hut listening to a tape of the Rolling Stones on his cassette player. He switches the music off then saunters slowly toward our truck, scuffing across the asphalt in his dusty sandals. He grips a machine gun in his small hands. He leans down to our open window, peering in at our i.d. badges, warily comparing us to the tiny, laminated photographs on the cards. Straightening up, he flicks one of the tasseled ends of his red and white-checked *gutra* over his shoulder, then waves us through with the barrel of the gun.

Abu Ali is a wild, uninhabited island. Except for the road and the pipeline there is nothing but camel grass and low dunes. Sand tracks lead off the narrow road at abrupt angles, veering to either shoreline. We pick a track at random and stop to put the truck in 4-wheel drive. We head for the dunes, growling in the lower gears. It is only a kilometer or so to the shore of the Persian Gulf. Lapping against the white sugar sand is water bluer than the stone in a Navajo ring, shimmering in the thick, humid air.

We climb out, laughing and stretching. A blanket is laid down, a square of white cloth like a flag of truce on the sand. We drag our provisions to it—all the things necessary for survival: water, food, paperback novels, sunscreen. We sit down cross-legged, eating fried chicken with our bare hands, tossing the bones over the side, and guzzling iced tea until it drips down our chins. We wear an odd assortment of hats: Giff in a sailor's cap with the brim folded down, Ardelle in a safari helmet. Bob wears a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes. Dennis has a homemade *gutra* made out of a white T-shirt that says "Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore" held to his head with a bungie cord, and I wear a frayed straw cowboy hat with a blue-black crow's feather stuck in the hatband. We gaze out over the gulf, north to Iran.

When the flies begin to drive us mad we submerge ourselves up to our shoulders in water. The tide is moving out fast, leaving us sitting in the shallows. The water is not exactly refreshing—it's thick with salt and close to body temperature. But it lulls us, an amniotic fluid gently rocking our weightless bodies.

We are so still that a large white bird, an egret, drifts very close to us on the current. Very slowly, I begin to follow it, walking my hands on the sandy bottom, trailing my legs out behind me. I move parallel to it, keeping the same languid pace, and the bird, if it notices anything at all, sees only a floating hat, which memory tells it is not a dangerous thing. I turn carefully to look over my shoulder and see the others behind me. Now the bird leads the five of us and we all move north along the shoreline as if pulled along on a string.

It is the bird who breaks the silence, opening its beak to let out a shrill cry. It rises heavily, beating its spreading wings, and the sound the air makes moving through its feathers is the sound of a lasso in the wind. Its legs hang, black stalks beneath the white body, the toes like the long tines of forks dripping salty water. We watch it go, flying low over the Persian Gulf. We watch until we can't see it clearly anymore, until the white wings disappear into the wisps of black smoke that drift slowly towards us from the north, from the burning city of Abadan. □

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NO LOOSE ENDS

Alvin Greenberg

Henry Henry, the world's most amazing bachelor, is so perfectly ordered in everything he does that even his first and last names are the same, a problem for some people when they first meet him because they can't figure out whether to call him Henry or Mr. Henry, but ultimately a solution for all because they're right either way and, like a lot else in Henry Henry's life, it doesn't make any difference. He has just been off meeting a lot of new people, too, all of whom soon ended up calling him by his first name whether they intended to or not. Back home now from a three day business trip to the west coast, late Wednesday night, actually Thursday a.m. already because his plane didn't land in Minneapolis until after midnight, Henry, with a meeting set up with his boss at eight in the morning to review the results of his trip, is doing laundry.

The washing machine is picking up speed on its entry into the final spin cycle, load two, all white. The dryer is already bouncing and fluffing the colors. On the ironing board nearby, which always stands at the ready, the iron is warming up toward the cotton setting for the three or four items Henry knows will need to be touched up. Anyone watching Henry would think how proud his mother would be to see him now, but Henry knows the truth: either she would be finding him perfectly ridiculous for staying up at two a.m. doing the laundry or she would be checking to see how much detergent he used and re-ironing the sleeve of his blue shirt.

Henry, liberated from his ancestry by ignorance of his family's remote relationship to famous and long-dead Patrick, isn't thinking of either of his parents, though; he is watching the two vibrating white cubes that sit side by side in his immaculate basement and visualizing how in a few minutes he will move the clothes from the dryer to the folding table, the clothes from the washer to the dryer. He is sipping from a glass of instant iced tea, the only dirty—if that is the word—piece of kitchenware in the house. When he left for the airport Monday morning, the dishwasher was running; tonight, while the first load of clothes churned away in the basement, Henry was just above it in the kitchen, emptying the dishwasher, putting everything away in its drawer or cabinet. Even the spoon with which he stirred his iced tea has been rinsed, dried, and returned to the silverware drawer. Now, while the second load of wash dries, a small load that will take little time, Henry folds the first, irons the few items that have emerged a bit wrinkled, and carries them upstairs to hang them up in the bedroom closet or lay them neatly in his dresser drawers. Soon he will go back down for the load of whites, which will be finished drying by then. He will fold them and carry them up. On his way back up he will stop in the kitchen, rinse out his iced tea glass, set it in the dishwasher, wipe up any spots he has left on the kitchen counter, then finish his trip to the bedroom to put away the carefully folded whites. Finally he will take himself to the bathroom. He will shower and then put himself away in his bed, between crisp, clean sheets, for the few remaining hours of the night.

So how do you like Henry, Mr. Henry, so far? People—especially people like his college roommates and Vito Pappenheimer with whom he shared an apartment for a couple of years and Vito's off-and-on girlfriend Crinoline who stayed there regularly and the co-workers who admire the broad, empty expanse of his desk top—have often remarked that he would make someone a good wife someday. But that was before the days of sexual equality, of course, and besides, as his ex-wife could tell you, it was wrong.

By coincidence, though she didn't just get back from anywhere and doesn't have to be anywhere especially early in the morning, she is also awake at this hour. Her name is Malvina Knott, and she is a distant relative of the people of Knott's Berry Farm fame, though she has never been there and her own solitary attempt at jam-making ended in a boiled-over disaster. She is not washing clothes, either; what she took off to go to sleep lies scattered around the floor of the living room—yes, she does have a bedroom, whose floor is also littered with clothing, but she often prefers to sleep on her big couch—and now all she is wearing is a torn grey sweatshirt that says University of Massachusetts, which is no place where she or anyone she knows ever went to school. Propped up on a pile of multicolored throw pillows and covered by an old purple afghan, she was reading just a moment ago, but now her book—*The Fabulous Philippines*—lies face down against her breasts, and she is thinking about the son-of-a-bitch she used to be married to.

That was not pleasure reading she was doing, by the way, but homework; she owns a small travel agency located in a classy suburban Minneapolis shopping mall, and specializes in finding off-the-beaten-path vacation spots for her well-to-do and much-traveled clients. Thanks to her profession, she has even had the opportunity to do a fair amount of traveling herself. She has had a lot of very interesting trips and a few adventurous ones and even some highly educational ones, but the marital journey she took with old Henry, she is thinking, was none of those.

She is even thinking about calling him up. The telephone, stretched to the limit of its long cord, is on the floor next to the couch, buried under her skirt, sweater, somewhere. Yeah, maybe she'll call him up. In spite of the late hour, she can see him standing there in his bedroom holding up a freshly-ironed shirt on a hanger and turning it this way and that to check if he's missed anything.

"Hey, Mr. Clean," she'd say to him, "how's your wrinkle-free life these days?"

Actually, Henry has already hung up all three of his perfectly-ironed shirts and is standing in the bathroom, staring into the toilet bowl. Just above the water line faint rust stains mar the white porcelain. The urge to sleep—it's past three now and the long business day and long flight are finally beginning to catch up with him—and the urge to clean are doing battle in him, and he just can't manage to say, "Screw it, I'll do it tomorrow."

The reason he can't do that is, simply, this: he fears that one little bit of putting it off, one small chore postponed, one tiny corner left unwashed, one weak moment of deciding to "do it tomorrow," and the next thing you know, probably by the time tomorrow arrives, the day after at the very latest, he will be living in Malvina's world, with brown rust stains laminating the whole inside of the toilet bowl, old socks hanging over the backs of kitchen chairs, the vacuum cleaner motor burned out from being run with the bag full, three glasses and a handful of silverware sitting in the cold, greasy water in the sink, an open carton of spoiled milk in the refrigerator, in the garage a dirty car low on oil that should have been changed months ago and with an almost empty gas tank, in the yard overgrown shubbery and the only untrimmed lawn in the neighborhood, and back upstairs in the bedroom closet a wrinkled shirt that will have to be ironed first thing in the morning so he'll have something to wear to work.

That's living? he thinks.

You think it's hard to live like Henry lives—socks rolled, wastebaskets emptied, lawn clipped and raked, car waxed, furniture polished, the dog in its bed and the people in theirs—not that there are either pets or people in Henry's life—clean matched guest towels in the downstairs bath, glasses inspected for spots before they're lined up by size in the cabinets? It's not hard. Just ask him.

"Nothing to it," he answers. "It's the only way to live."

All you have to do is hold your breath all the time.

Malvina, sometimes, used to walk by and whack him in the stomach with the back of her hand, so that he'd go "Oofff!"

"Attaboy, Henry," she'd say, "let it all out."

Henry would pick up whatever it was he'd been carrying back to its proper place—the kitchen chair that had somehow ended up in the bathroom, the three plastic dishes he'd found under the wicker table on the porch, the dustmop that was lying on the back seat of the car—and go on his way without a word. Not that he wouldn't be thinking some words. He'd be thinking plenty of words, most of them pretty much the same: for example, how can you survive in the midst of such a mess? how can you see where you're going? how can you find anything?

Actually, Malvina is having a hard time finding what she's looking for. The telephone is down there under that pile of clothes somewhere, but every time she drags her hand through it she comes up with a knee sock or a bra or a blouse with one sleeve inside out. She hears a muffled mechanical voice telling her to hang up the receiver and try her number again. Before she can find the receiver to do what she's told, the voice is replaced by an awful buzzing that even the pile of clothing does nothing to subdue. She's not tired and she doesn't have to be at work until afternoon, so she thinks, Maybe I should get some of this stuff picked up and put away. But pretty soon the terrible buzzing stops, and she thinks, Nah, screw it, I'll do it tomorrow, knowing perfectly well she won't.

The reasons she won't are, simply, these: one, that she doesn't have the slightest idea where she'd even start, given the incredible volume of stuff to be picked up even in just this one room, with the records and record jackets, separately, spread over the floor around the stereo system and the books and dishes piled in layers on the chairs and the make-up on the coffee table and the clothes, yes, the clothes everywhere; two, that once she started, there clearly would never be an end to it, what with the bedroom still to go if she ever got the living room cleaned up, and the bathroom after that, and the kitchen, and the study, and meanwhile she'd still be living, right?, changing clothes, dirtying dishes, dust would be collecting, the wastebaskets filling up, the soap dish thick with scum and her brush full of black hair; and three, that if she went at it hard enough, if she kept at it long enough, if she succeeded, that is, if she finally got the dishwasher emptied and all her pantyhose washed and put away, if she got the army of overgrown dustballs swept out from under her bed and the crud off the floor around the toilet bowl, if she cleaned the ashes out of the fireplace and alphabetized the bookshelves and moved her out-of-season clothes to the back hall closet and cleared a path to the washer and dryer by stacking up the empty boxes and grocery bags mildewing on the basement floor, pretty soon, well, eventually, at any rate, she would find herself living in Henry's world, with a place for everything and everything in its place, no sooner removed and used than cleaned and put back where it belongs, known, set, fixed, immutable.

That's living? she thinks.

You think it's hard to live like Malvina does—kitchen garbage can overflowing, records stuck away in the wrong jackets, mold flourishing in the plastic container of ham salad, overdue library books hidden under the newspapers piled on top of the refrigerator, the dog sleeping on the bed and shedding everywhere, the drawers of her desk full of scraps of paper with phone numbers on them—no names, just numbers—well? It's not hard. Just ask her.

"Nah," she says, "it's a snap. Nothing to it."

All you have to do is just let things happen all the time.

Henry, sometimes, used to walk by and pat her gently on her round little tummy, which always made her feel like purring.

But then he'd say, "Suck in that gut, lady."

And just like that her purr would turn into a growl.

People used to say that Henry and Malvina where the "perfect couple." At the wedding, which, Henry being an Episcopalian and Malvina a Lutheran, was held at a friend's home and presided over by a mail-order minister of the Church of All Saints and Saviors, people said, searching carefully for just the right word even as they spoke, that Malvina and Henry had a certain, ahh, well, you know, a kind of . . . balance.

Can you believe that?

A balance of power, maybe. Like identical weights set on the opposite ends of a playground teeter-totter. Not a chance of ever coming to earth. A geopolitical stalemate. No wonder that, divorced, they live at opposite ends of the Twin Cities, Henry in a southwestern suburb of Minneapolis and Malvina in a northeastern suburb of St. Paul. The fulcrum on which they now balance as precariously as they once did on the thin peak of their marriage is the telephone. Which Malvina is going to pick up at any moment now.

Yes, she is going to find the now separated receiver and cradle under her pile of discarded clothing. She is going to reunite them temporarily and re-establish the missing dial tone. She is going to dial Henry's number and all hell is going to break loose. But before she does, let me ask you this:

Do you know either of these people?

Is there something you find even remotely familiar in the behavior of either of these people?

Don't lie.

And now that you have answered that in the grudging affirmative—be thankful that, for the moment, you haven't been asked to identify whose behavior makes one of theirs seem so familiar to you—try this one:

Whose side are you on?

Because make no mistake about it: this is war, and you have already enlisted on one side or the other.

Be honest, be quick: because the phone is already ringing.

If Malvina's rampaging barbarian horde swept suddenly across your world, pillaging the starched and folded piles of laundry, raping the freshly mopped linoleum kitchen floor and other gods of household order, scattering everything at random across garage floors and lawns and suburban streets, would you be standing on the rooftop welcoming her rag-tag guerilla mob by littering those same streets with confetti or would you be huddling in the far corner of the basement, behind the home-canned peaches and tomatoes still stacked and labeled in orderly fashion on the row of metal shelves, plotting a tidy insurrection?

And if Henry's neat and soldierly columns of invaders came marching lock-stepped and starched-uniformed across your frontiers, sweeping the streets and trimming front lawn hedges as they passed, repairing broken tricycles, oiling the City Hall clock, passing out new—and accurate—bus schedules, would you be sitting quietly at your desk composing a well-thought-out welcoming letter-to-the-editor or would you have fled to the slums, hiding out among rats and garbage, your mind filled with inchoate thoughts while you passed out badly-printed revolutionary pamphlets in a wild-eyed attempt to rouse the citizens to rebellion?

Are you at the barricades yet? Little time remains. Henry, wondering who could be calling at this hour, has already switched on the bedside lamp and is staring at the phone that sits on his dresser, its angular edges precisely lined up with the sides of the dresser. Malvina, wondering by now if perhaps she hasn't dialed a wrong number, is still trying to free a shirtsleeve tangled in the phone's coiled cord.

Before you know it, the first reports from the front are coming in.

Did Henry know who was the only person in the world—discounting random wrong numbers, which have no place in his thinking—who was likely to be calling him at three o'clock in the morning? You bet. He is a smart fellow, much respected by his superiors in the lucid, hierarchical management structure of—you guessed it—American Container Corp. He knows, as they all know, what belongs where. What could only go where. But, as is often the case, this knowledge neither solves nor saves. He still wants to know why. Why, Malvina, why?

And was Malvina, a smart cookie in her own right, who sets her own work hours and whose satisfied and very picky clients return again and again to have her plan the always surprising trips that only she could arrange for them, in the least bit of doubt about how Henry would react to a three a.m. phone call? Not a chance. But, as is often the case, certainty provides no solace either. She can't see why Henry has to be so upset.

"I guess," she says, given the terse hostility of his initial response, "people don't like to have their routines tampered with."

"This is no routine, Malvina," he tells her, "this is sleep. I have to get up to go to work at six-thirty."

"Sleep is a routine, Henry."

"Work, Malvina, work."

"Work is the routinest routine of all. Why are you so defensive about your routines?"

"Because you are attacking me, Malvina," he says, and she can hear that he is about to hang up.

"Don't," she says very quickly.

"Give me one reason," he says.

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"Because," she says, "I love you."

From Henry's end of the line, nothing but silence. And yet more silence.

"So tell me, Henry," says Malvina after the silence has gone on forever, "how are you feeling about people these days?"

More silence. Another forever. Then: "On the whole, I would have to say that people tend to live up to your expectations of them."

"Why, Henry," exclaims Malvina, "that's the nicest thing I ever heard you say!"

What Henry meant, however, as you probably expected, was that if you expect the worst of people, then, indeed, they probably will live up to your expectations. When he explains this to Malvina, she no longer thinks it is the nicest thing she has ever heard him say.

"Some days, Henry," she finally says, "you almost convince me."

"Why, Malvina," he mimics, "that's about the nicest thing I've ever heard you say."

What Malvina meant, of course, was wreathed in the poison gas aura of sarcasm, as befits the battlefield. Aware of the lethal hazards of modern warfare, however, Henry was, as we have seen, safely ensconced behind the gas mask of irony.

What we want to know is: can anything of value—civilization, for example—survive the conditions of such a no man's—and no woman's—land as this?

And if so, how?

Did he say "civilization?" you've got to be wondering. I mean, these are just a couple of people, right? One basically quite screwed up and the other with a pretty reasonable perspective on life. Or, if you want, both of them complete assholes. Whatever. But "civilization?" You've got to be kidding. I mean, "Henry Henry," for Christ's sake, "Malvina Knott!" Why they're hardly even people, you know, why, they're just fantastic exaggerations, that's all, whattayacallits, stereotypes, what a joke, you can't tell me the fate of civilization depends on a pair of stereotypes, even if one of them has in fact got things figured out pretty straight. Surely you jest.

Wrong. I am not kidding. It is no joke. I never jest, at least not about matters of life and death like this.

Henry and Malvina used to live right down the street from me.

Also, I suppose, it's simply an inescapable fact that some people actually do live out more or less stereotypical existences. Maybe more people than we want to admit. That does not make them any the less real. Any the less people. Or the fate of civilization any the less dependent upon them.

Stereotypes: think of your uncle, The Absent-Minded Professor; your brother, The Playboy; your old college roommates, The Wimp, The Jock, and The Brain; your kid, The Teenager; your mother, The Mother.

Think of Henry. Think of Malvina.

Is the fact that she loves him, and has even managed to say so, even if it is at a totally inappropriate hour under less than ideal conditions, rendered any the less relevant because she—my former neighbor, I remind you—is, as you like to put it, a stereotype? Is the fact that he—also, remember, once a neighbor of mine—also loves her, even though he hasn't, at this miserable hour of the night, been able to say so, rendered any less ditto? And if so, what about yourself: The Salesperson, The Waiter, The Teacher, Bricklayer, Bartender, Student, Steelworker, Doctor, Policeman, Busdriver, The Optimist, Pessimist, Moralist, Liberal, Gambler . . . we could go on forever trying to make sure there are no loose ends, but you know what I mean.

What are they going to do?

What are *you* going to do?

On whom does the future of civilization depend?

Whose side are you on *now*?

"Now" is Thursday morning. 6:29 a.m. Henry is sitting up in bed waiting for the one remaining lurch that will set off his electronic clock radio, informing him of the precise temperature and wind velocity awaiting him outside. Not that, giving his projected trajectory from house to garage to car to enclosed parking ramp to elevator to office, he'll be subjecting himself to actual outside conditions. But it never hurts to know: useless knowledge is still knowledge.

He is staring at the telephone receiver which he still holds in his hand, on his lap.

This is the last thing he heard from the telephone receiver:

"Sterility, Henry: it's unnatural the way you've got everything so locked in place that there's nothing alive there; it's a world of things. Your house always looks like no one lives there. It's a good thing you don't have a dog; you'd spend half your life vacuuming it."

This is the last thing he said into the telephone receiver:

"Chaos, Malvina: that's the natural way of the world all right, everything scattered meaninglessly at random; nothing but things. You've got such a total mess in your house that there's no room left for anyone to live there. You spend half your life looking for your car keys."

Nothing emerges from the telephone receiver now. Not the buzz of the dial tone. Not the voice of a recording nagging someone to replace it. Not the screech of its displaced discomfort. Silence.

Malvina rolls over, face down on the couch, the silent receiver wedged against her jaw. No alarm clock is preparing to go off in her living room, but an early ray of sunlight through the front window illuminates the layer of dust on the small portion of coffee table top that isn't covered with books, magazines, cups, glasses, a crumpled potato chip bag. . . . With one eye cocked open, even face down she is granted by the angle of the sun a clearer perception of the density of dust than she has ever had before and thinks: Who needs it? Knowledge rendered useless because you don't intend to do anything with it is still knowledge.

So here they are, each in her, his, separate world. Hours, obviously, have passed, and the last things said resounded with the clear political overtones of the classic impasse. Now nothing passes through the channel of

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communication but silence. But note: the lines are still open. Soon things will begin to happen. Henry has to rise, dress, take himself off to that inescapable meeting with his boss, because . . . because . . . because that is what Henry has to do. And Malvina, likewise, is going to have to arise, sooner than she expects, because even now the dog is edging its great, shaggy body off her bed, stretching, slouching down the hall toward her, ready to demand that she take it for its morning walk and, well, that is what she is going to have to do. Or else.

So here they are, for the moment, still. Hostilities appear to have ceased, but negotiations do not appear to have begun. Can civilization survive under such a tenuous truce? In a moment the world is going to be making demands of them equivalent—or nearly so—to the demands they make of themselves, of each other. And then what? These are my neighbors, don't forget; I liked it when they lived just down the street from me and, let's face it, I miss them now that they've moved away. Why else would I be spending so much time and working so hard here trying to bring them back—when, as I'm sure you're dying to tell me, there's no way I can really know what's going on with them in their private worlds and late-night, early-morning hours since they moved off in different directions to those far-flung suburbs.

But I had better know, hadn't I? They're my neighbors, after all. At least I shall always think of them as my neighbors, even if it means remembering how Henry's always-polished car shamed mine and what Malvina's dog did to my lawn, even if they have fled in anger and dismay to those distant, disparate suburbs, abandoning me here on the home front. The telephone, I would like to remind you, is only one of the miracles we have devised to erase great distances. Here we are, after all. Anything can happen. So, like I say, I had better know. And so had you. Or else. ☐

KATHLEEN HALME

ENGLISH TO ENGLISH

1. Dictation

A perfect word exists. It chooses its object.
When you walk across the winter lake
the land moves back and back.
Once again you don't know anything.
Here is what there is:
a dog sniffing a fish flipping on the ice,
ice-fishing tip-ups, set, and no fishermen;
when you reach the promontory—
a spilled bucket of mealy worms
(their maggotty color doesn't make you think
  of anything).
Then the tick of leaves left on trees.
Susurrus is a word.

2. Explication

Man A:
You go to the gallery opening
to watch him watch the people
look at the art about art,
to delight in his delight of women:
the curly-top with a white ribbon
bowed on the side of her head.
At a distance, you too love her in an instant.
And still the image,
the perversity of moment looking for symbol,
still the afterimage attracts you,
and he becomes real only when he's gone.

Man B:
One time you missed his presence so much
you rode to his house, climbed on the windowledge,
  looked in.
The obscenity of his objects made you leave.
All the way home you hoped you hadn't left
footprints on the ledge.
He becomes real, all-at-once,
by a texture:
the roughness of his wool coat against your cheek;
by a color:
the stain on his palm after you have eaten
a few berries from his hand.
What is the word for the back of the hand?
We want what we can't understand with our minds.

3. Translation

Remember that time the shadow of light settled
  around you,
filled your room, you tiny creature,
held you flat against the floor,
as if a huge hand were pressing you down behind
  the neck,
until you gave in to what was true without you
and to every word that ever failed you.

■

ACCEPTED WISDOM

Erin McGraw

McPherson liked to claim that the day Anne clipped him over the ear with the teapot and left for the train station was the happiest day of his life. Their marriage had been noisy, violent—he never knew when he would come home to a squalid house, shattered dinnerware strewn from kitchen to bedroom. "The woman was born to make man fear the afterlife," McPherson said to anyone who would listen the day after Anne caught the train and left Pennsylvania for good.

For a week after she left, McPherson and his daughter Nora crept through the house, startling each other around corners, jumping at slight sounds. In the still nights McPherson lay rigid, waiting every minute for Anne to reappear and let fly with whatever fragile object was handy. In the mornings and evenings he made one cheese sandwich after another for himself and his daughter. Then, one afternoon, Nora abruptly asked her father what he would like for supper.

"Truffles and pheasant under glass," he said.

"How about stew?" she said. "I'm tired of eating sandwiches."

Nora was thirteen. How could McPherson have been expected to know she could make a stew?

"Give me some money," she said. "I'll need to go to Hays' to get meat. We're out of bread, too. What do you want to bring for lunch tomorrow?" McPherson, slightly dazed, gave her everything in his wallet.

It seemed to take no time. "Top of her class," he bragged to the miners, to Hannah, "and nothing she can't do. Roasts! How many girls could make their dads a roast? She's got Hays so he calls her when the good meat comes in." He was seeing his daughter for the first time, and he could scarcely believe his good fortune. He was careful with her, as gentle as a suitor, thinking she was his reward for the terrible years with Anne.

"Your mother," he told Nora once, "was—unstable." Nora watched him as she always did, her large eyes taking him in, and he stopped, knowing he'd sounded foolish. What should he have told her? The last night, in their bed, Anne had whispered, "You made me crawl over glass for you. I'll make you crawl for me." What could you tell a girl about a mother like that? And Nora Anne's own daughter, though it hardly seemed believable.

Anne was gone nearly a year before she sent for Nora. By then McPherson's life with his daughter was quiet and orderly, and he found that he looked forward to returning to her from Hannah's every night. As the summer came on they watched the blue shadow from the tower at the switching yard advance across the garden. "I can give my daughter now what she has always needed," Anne had written. "I can teach her the things she needs to know."

"Ha," said McPherson. The girl didn't need to know what Anne could teach her. It was a week before he managed to tell Nora about the letter, and only then because he was afraid Anne would write again, or worse, telephone. "It would be just like her, the she-devil," McPherson told Hannah. "Just when I've got my life cleaned of her messes."

On Thursday night, while he and Nora were sitting on the screened porch and waiting for the sweet twilight air, McPherson said, "Your mother has written a letter."

"Is she well?"

Hannah would have said, "Is she still throwing things?" McPherson peered at Nora's serene profile; it was lovely and pure, and revealed nothing.

"She says she's well." What she'd in fact said was that she had finally achieved some tiny measure of happiness after the years of drudgery with McPherson, but he saw no point in sharing this.

"Is she coming back?"

"I don't think so." Not that he'd have her, as he'd told Hannah. Even a man like McPherson, notoriously soft on women, had to draw the line somewhere. There was relief in this life without jars exploding against kitchen and bedroom walls. He studied Nora for some minute sign, a direction to proceed. Her face was steady as a face on a coin. *She couldn't be missing her,* he thought. *If she cared at all, she'd be all over me for everything the she-devil said. It was only polite to ask.* "She said she misses you," he said.

Nora kept looking into the cooling evening air. "But not enough to come home."

"No. She didn't talk about coming home."

Nora remained quiet for a long time. McPherson watched the shadow gain three pickets. She had always been her father's girl, everyone could see it. Any daughter of Anne's would have taken off like a banshee. Nora was steady, like her dad. She planned ahead for things, asking him Sunday what he'd like to eat Thursday. She mended the china bowls and knick-knacks that Anne had left demolished in her wake. "I wish she'd come home," Nora said.

"She wants you to join her," McPherson said before he could stop himself. In the deepening air Nora's face was luminous, and he rushed on. "She's living in California. She works in a bank. Her house has an avocado tree in back." And a lawyer inside, Anne had added for McPherson's benefit, whose manliness was such that she craved him several times a day. They bedded, she said, on ripe avocados.

"She rides a bicycle to work." He and Hannah had laughed themselves weak at the notion of Anne pedaling ferociously to her office—"Gangway!" they had roared. But watching Nora's transfixed face, McPherson could find no humor. Her eyes were large and still, and he had no idea what she might be remembering, imagining. California, after all, and Nora sitting with him so still and lovely. His own daughter and he couldn't tell if she was thinking of leaving him.

"Why?" Nora asked.

"Why?" It was a good question. For all the talk of avocados, Anne had never explained why, and why now, she wanted Nora. "Well, why would a mother want her daughter to be with him? She misses you." He should perhaps have also said *She loves you,* but there was only so much that he felt fairness obliged of him.

"She left you," Nora said.

"Yes," McPherson said, alarmed enough now to be cagey with his words.

"She doesn't want you to come."

"No." Would, she said, escort him off her property with the tip of a knife—but no need to tell Nora, no need.

"What would I do in California?" Nora asked, still gazing into the blue yard.

McPherson was having trouble catching his breath. He felt a wrenching deep in his body, as if the thread—unexpectedly slender—that moored him were being battered by heavy seas. "Go to school," he said. "The beach is there. Help your mother around the house." What else could he say? Should he tell her she would meet movie stars?

After a long pause throughout which McPherson had to heave air into his lungs, she asked, "What would you do without me?"

It was the time to explain how special their relationship was. She couldn't want him to come home at night to a cold house, a silent one. She couldn't leave him alone, lighting lamps from room to room. His lips began to move, testing words softly while Nora waited. Unbidden, he thought of the rare mornings he rose before she did. In sleep she looked tender, her hair spilling across the sheets. She slept tidily, sometimes murmuring into her pillow. There was always the scent of warm skin and soap. "I don't know," he said. "I can't bear to think of it."

When Hannah asked him, as she often did, what he would do if she never let him in again, he said things like, "I'd shimmy down the chimney and come into your bedroom like Santa Claus."

"Watch I don't light a fire under you."

"I know all about your fires," he said.

Hannah lived exactly halfway between McPherson's front door and the gate outside the loading yard. Often in the summer he would leave his own house early, to eat strawberries with Hannah for breakfast. She was happy on those warm mornings, and had every window in her small house flung wide. As a result she had to keep shushing McPherson when he teased her and held her and attempted to balance strawberries on top of her breasts. "They can hear you in the next county," she said.

"It's good for them. They should remember what it was like before they all started acting like bankers. Everybody," he brayed out the window, "should be eating strawberries."

He brought her things—clusters of wisteria whose scent flooded the house, pictures and coupons from magazines. Before Anne had left he used to bring lettuce and broccoli from the garden, but after Nora took over he felt odd. Only once did he bring her a cabbage that Nora didn't seem to know what to do with. "You shouldn't have brought me this," Hannah said.

"It was extra. No sacrifice."

"Still, Nora's garden. For God's sake."

Occasionally, when McPherson and Nora were out walking, they passed Hannah on the street. McPherson held his breath and looked at the tops of trees on these occasions. "Hello, Miss Crawley," Nora would say.

"Nora. Mac."

McPherson would dip his head just in time to see Hannah's cool smile slide over him, and would smile in return, a shambling, weak thing.

"How are you getting on?" Hannah would say to Nora.

"Well, thanks. People are kind—Hays is always saving me special cuts."

"You must be his most special customer," Hannah said.

Nora looked down and smiled. "The garden's coming along now," she said. "I don't know what to do with all our cabbage—Dad says he'll go green if he eats any more." McPherson, back to looking at high branches, winced at the delicate seriousness of his daughter's voice.

"Always too much cabbage. My own father used to complain. I have a recipe for cabbage soup you might try."

"You're sure that's wise?" McPherson blurted. "Giving the girl your own recipes, I mean." Nora and Hannah wheeled to look at him, and he danced back a few steps in the dusty street. "My mother'd die before she gave out a recipe, you know."

"I don't mind sharing a cabbage recipe," Hannah said, and Nora laughed.

At such times McPherson had horrifying visions. The girl, so serious and cordial, had no idea. Hannah, that forthright woman. He imagined them over the teapot in the kitchen, talking. The two looking up at him, maybe lobbing a handy saucer.

Nora often watched Hannah as she went on her way. "I like Miss Crawley," she said once with unusual vehemence. "She's better than anyone else."

"How are your studies coming?" McPherson asked. "There's nothing more important than education."

It was only once he'd felt the urge to ask Nora if she knew anything, if people had talked at the laundry or Hays', a day when Hannah had come down the street bright as flowers, and it was all McPherson could do not to slip his arm into the nook of her waist. "There aren't many like her," he'd sighed after they parted.

"She's pretty," Nora said.

"None prettier."

"She cooks, too, all alone in that house. Why doesn't she marry?"

McPherson recognized this as no more than he deserved. "Well now," he coughed. "Marriage isn't for everyone. Maybe she doesn't want a lunk of a man coming around and dirtying her house."

Nora was quiet for three blocks, and McPherson began to calm, seeing the conversation over. "I would," she announced.

"Would what?"

"Want the lunk of a man around. What's the point, otherwise?"

At that McPherson stopped dead in the street to stare at his daughter, who appeared unimpressed with her own powers of induction. "You, miss," he said, "know a thing or two."

He wanted to run back to Hannah then and there, leaving a trail of settling dust, sweep her up in the finest movie-house tradition, her firm waist and bright lips. Her all alone in that house, making honey cakes for a man who came to her stamped with the dirt of the mine and who left before the sun went down. He was dizzy, amazed, stock still in the street. Nora took his arm and began to walk again. "I hope she remembers about the recipe," she said. "I've done everything I can think of, and there's still more coming up in the garden. Look, there's a robin on the post."

Sighing, McPherson fell back into step with his chattering daughter, who held his arm lightly and with such pride.

"I don't understand it," Hannah said. "A teenage girl, a pretty thing."

"She's too smart for the boys here," McPherson said.

"I don't doubt it. But still, Mac. Sixteen years old. Doesn't anyone call her?"

"How'm I to know? I'm at meetings every night—maybe she's having boys over. Maybe she's entertaining her whole class." He knew better. When he came in the door at night he could see her blossom. She listened carefully as he explained about the troubles, she asked questions and gave him logical, intelligent comments. "Intelligent! About the damn union! We should have *her* dealing with the company," he said.

The troubles had started when a section of the southern end of the mine had collapsed, taking eight men with it. McPherson had been called in to listen while a company man read a statement. The accident was the result of mining carelessly, too near the supports, the man read. McPherson didn't know he was even listening. He'd been quiet in the hall, thinking of the men—Fogarty, Adams—now buried. He'd been as surprised as anyone when he reared up in the middle of the statement and cried, "How do you know?" The representative had lowered the page he was reading from and glared at him, but it was too late. McPherson climbed on top of his chair. "How do you *know*? It only went down five hours ago. Just what are you trying to sell us?"

That was the beginning. Perhaps if McPherson had been able to keep still everything would have stayed calm. The company would have closed off the southern section—as they were planning to do, and would have told the men if they'd only remained quiet long enough to hear—the few necessary layoffs would have been made, and worker safety would have been maintained. As it was, there was a riot there in the middle of the day, the men screaming, throwing chairs and the company podium through the windows. McPherson found himself collaring the district manager, shouting, "You sold us our houses, you sell us our liquor and our laundry detergent. What are you selling us now?" He didn't know he had it in him.

When he came home that night it was late. One of his shirtsleeves had been ripped clean away, the small of his back ached from where he'd been kicked or hit, and spidery cuts were etched across his arm; he'd had to jump out one of the broken windows to avoid the police. Nora came streaming out the door to him, laughing, crying. She flung herself into his arms.

"They wouldn't tell me, the bastards," she cried. "Twenty men dead and you not home and they wouldn't tell me anything. 'We cannot give out the information you request. Company policy prohibits—' My God! Twenty men gone!"

"Eight," he said, gently wriggling from her grasp. "Only eight. And me still alive. Come on now, let me wash. I'm too old to be brawling half the day."

She stood by the bathroom door after handing him clean towels; he could feel her trembling presence in the hall outside. "I'm all *right,*" he called to her, and then, "Nora, love, fix me some supper, I'm famished." In fact, he had no appetite at all, but whole pots of soup were preferable to emerging, arms stinging and legs weak, to a daughter trembling like a rabbit.

"This means strike, of course," he said over the soup. "God knows how long before we see another paycheck."

Nora sat across from McPherson with her hands folded around a cup of tea; preparing the food had soothed her. "Hays'll extend credit," she said. "He'll have to."

How did she know such things? he wondered. There had never been a strike before. "Let's hope," he said.

McPherson hated the strike. He'd never been one for missing work, and he felt clumsy and trapped inside days with no set pattern. He tried to clean the house while Nora was off at school, but he didn't know what half of her pastes and solutions were. The day he cleaned the kitchen floor she laughed at him for going through half a bottle of polish. "We'll never get through the strike this way," she said, chasing him away from the cupboard.

He spent his afternoons with Hannah, but he left at four-thirty as he always had. He was uncomfortably aware that he didn't know how she spent the billowing hours they weren't together, and it annoyed him that she was so cheerful when he prepared to leave. "We could be taking advantage of this time," he told her. "We could make hay while the sun shines."

She smiled then, hummed a little air. She dusted the headboard with a corner of the pillowcase.

"Dammit, we could be talking to each other. Finding things out. We'll regret it later, how we wasted this time. What do we know about each other?" He crossed the bedroom to her dresser and picked up a photograph that stood near her brushes. "Who's this?"

"Mac, that's my mother. You know that."

"Well, tell me about her. I don't know anything other than her damned cabbage soup. Your own mother."

"What's to say? You knew her. She had a temper. She taught me the things that mothers teach their girls."

"What? What do mothers teach their girls? Tell me."

"Cleaning, Mac," she sighed. "Washing curtains every month. Floors every week. You get the old polish smell out with two teaspoons of vinegar in a bucket of water."

"You know that isn't what I meant."

"Always check to make sure a chicken is fresh," she said, "butchers'll lie. The skin should be butter yellow and firm. Don't ever buy under three pounds, it'll be all bone. Use the feet to make better soup." McPherson was pacing and grumbling.

"Never hang trousers on the line by the waist, it makes them sag. Only use white pillowcases and hankies, and always press them. Have nothing to do with a man whose hankies aren't pressed."

"That's what she taught you?"

"Who remembers? Maybe she taught me to tie my shoes. Maybe she taught me to smile at the men—though I doubt it, that woman. What are you teaching Nora?"

"That's what's worrying me," he said.

At home in the long evenings he and Nora watched each other. He began to test her. "Did you put the feet in this soup?" he asked over dinner.

"Of course. Makes the stock richer."

Or, on walks, he'd point. "Look—Henry must be helping with the wash. Look at how those pants are hung out."

"Few more times, they'll be ruined. Waists'll sag right down to the pockets," she said. He couldn't get over it. Anne could never have taught her so much. How could Nora have learned it all, without him ever knowing?

The work she brought home nights was no less mysterious. Economics, trigonometry—"Shouldn't you be studying with your friends?" he asked.

"They don't know it any better than I do. And if they did, why should they tell me?"

He could hear Hannah laughing. "Will you do well?" he asked.

"I'll do well enough." She did better than well enough, they both knew it. She brought home A's, left them by his placemat to see while the soup cooled. So while neither said it, they both knew: *Well enough to go away*.

"I suppose," McPherson said with great casualness, "we'll need to be thinking about your future." Since the strike he'd seen them coming in, the catalogues and pamphlets from universities. He left them by her chair and she never said anything. She brought them to her room and he didn't see them again. He'd learned to leaf through them quickly before she came home, noting the pictures of pretty coeds with test tubes and musical instruments.

"No need for that now, Dad." And while he knew he couldn't ask for such sacrifices, that he hadn't the right, he could see no harm in keeping her, just until the strike was over, until he was back his own man again. Only that, he promised himself as he buried under coffee grounds the catalogue from the college in California, where Anne lived.

In his restlessness he was seeing more now than he ever had. When she put her hair up in the morning it stayed perfectly in place until he kissed her goodnight. She smelled at any hour of soap and, vaguely, yeast. She never cooked without an apron, she washed her aprons twice a week, but he never saw them soiled. Not even a dash of flour. It worried him.

"Daughter, we're getting dull. Let's go to a movie."

"How can we go to a movie? We could go for a walk. Maybe we'll see Miss Crawley."

He had been sitting in the same place when Anne told him everything she knew about Hannah, when she had systematically spattered the wall behind him with the contents of the refrigerator. He closed his eyes, remembering, and waited for the bottles and jars to crash around him again, but when he looked up Nora's face was as untroubled as milk. She bent to wipe the table, then took off her apron, and they walked together through the twilight.

He found himself watching her simplest gestures, staring, fascinated and appalled by this life with no waste motion, no excesses.

"Why're you wearing that old shirt? You've got prettier clothes than that."

"Muriatic acid today in chemistry," she said, stirring the oatmeal. And what chilled McPherson wasn't his daughter in a laboratory with muriatic acid, it was the absolute precision of a life that had a good reason, at age sixteen, to wear an old shirt of her father's to school. "Can you take another week of pork stew? Hays says pork'll be down next Tuesday if I can get in before school. Maybe I can coax a few more tomatoes out too, and we can do it right."

"Why don't you have a *boyfriend?*" McPherson demanded, slapping the table so hard his coffee jumped.

She turned then to stare at him. He couldn't for the life of him explain why he'd said it, it was the last thing he could have meant to say. He meant something entirely different, he meant *Why is your hair always tidy? Why do you never break anything? What can't I guess what you're thinking?* The oatmeal bubbled in the pot. "Do you have anyone particular in mind?" she said finally.

"You're here all the damn time. Cleansers. Soups. Damn ham hocks from the grocer. Every morning you slip in for his rotten bargains. You're sixteen years old, girl. Get out of the house."

"And what should I do then? Go down to the Cue and wait for someone to buy me drinks? Go to the station and hope for a sailor?"

"Nora. Don't be silly, girl."

"Well, you're right, aren't you? Get me a silk blouse, a black skirt. Get me high heels. After all. Can't have a boyfriend for wishing it."

"Nora."

"What do you think? You think this is choice?"

Her face was bleak, blasted—for a moment, it was the face of a woman much older. *Sixteen years old.* What had he done? "Nora," he said helplessly. She stared through him. His own girl, with her creamy face and dark hair. Supple hands, like her mother's. "Hey, Nora-nor," he pleaded.

She came over to him then, rested her fingers on his shoulder. Her mouth was soft and quivering. "What's there here, after all, in this town? Miners and married men. Can't find a beau I like better than you."

Her eyes were round, bright with liquid, and they rested on him so that for a moment he had to catch his breath. "There's never," he said, "been a girl like you."

"Oh, there are plenty like me."

"Not these days. Those college boys will never know what hit them."

"Who says I'm going to college?" She blinked and it was again the catch at his heart. Before he could manage a response she went on, "I couldn't live with myself, knowing you were alone in this house." She bent and kissed his head lightly and for a moment McPherson was quite sure that if she ever left him he would die.

"She's in a laboratory with muriatic acid but she says she's not going on," he said to Hannah. "Colleges in California send her catalogues."

"So aren't you happy?"

"Don't be a fool, woman. The girl's brilliant." He knew what happened to the ones who stayed, none better. Hadn't he seen them, all his life? "What's she going to do here? Take a job checking groceries at Hays'?"

"Take care of the father she adores?" Hannah's face was expressionless. He glared at her.

"This strike'll be over soon. The union says another month. Hannah, this is serious."

"I am serious. She can go back to getting the coal dust out of your boxers. What do you want out of the girl? You've convinced her you can't live without her."

"I can't."

"Well, then." She turned over, so McPherson saw only the back of her neck. "She's made you the happiest of men."

"I can't talk to you if you won't look at me."

"I don't see that you need to talk. You're upset she might be leaving, and you're upset when she promises she'll stay. No wonder Anne threw things."

"Don't bring her into it."

Hannah was still for a minute, then said, "Just what do you imagine you'd do with yourself if Nora left?"

"I'd get along. Come home nights, have a drink. Go down to the Cue for a few games."

"You've never shot pool in your life."

"That's not the point. I'd adjust. Get used to a quiet life."

"Well, then."

"Well, then what?"

"If that's how you see your options."

He looked at the back of her neck, how the lightly freckled skin sloped over her shoulders. He touched her hair. "Hannah, I didn't mean that. You won't be left untended."

"Mac, I'm forty-two. And I'm already untended."

He had the sense then to draw her close, although she lay beside him ungiving as stone. He watched the light play over the long spill of her back and hips. Her skin was warm, as smooth and fragrant as honey. How long had she imagined? McPherson wished he could explain to her. Nora would go to college, to Timbuktu. He would somehow learn, and keep her house for her—her house now, with her solvents, faint soap and yeast. Her own house, after all.

He held Hannah until finally she relaxed and slept and the thick afternoon light diminished. He gently kissed as much of her as he could reach without loosening his hold. It was as close to arguing as they'd ever come. If he held her, if he didn't slacken his hold, they might walk away with dignity, nothing shattered in their wake.

It wasn't until the afternoon was quite gone that he rose from the bed and quietly dressed. Nora would surely be concerned, imagining fantastic things, and he would need to calm her. Not tonight, but soon they would have to begin talking about her going away. Once he helped her see the pride of a solitary life, one lived with dignity and stillness, once he helped her see him in it, she would go. It was carrying on her own tradition, after all—the things she'd taught him. He would practice while she was at school, to find the words.

He walked quickly, cutting up the alley behind his street as he rarely did—it was narrow and foul, and dogs were often there. There was no light, and as a result, he scarcely recognized Nora when he saw her at the corner—recognized really only her posture, the small squared shoulders in the too-large shirt. Not in the kitchen at all, but pressed against the wall of this damp alley. She was standing in the dark, peering into the lit street that led into town. The only house there belonged to Hays.

McPherson stopped and watched his daughter while she leaned further into the light and looked at the house. He could see her face. And had he not been watching, he would have passed her on the street. Stamped across the even features that had come from her mother and the tilted eyes that were her father's own. Gazing at Hays' house. It was wildness, despair. His own daughter.

Hays was forty if he was a day. His wife, his children. His courtesy, McPherson remembered. His small, pleasant comments, his ability to remember relations and birthdays. And then: His cologne. His black hair and well-tended hands. Nora, oh Nora, Nora.

McPherson turned as quietly as he could and crept back down the alley, leaving behind him his daughter's wild face. They would meet in the kitchen, and somehow he would have to gather himself, find all the wisdom he had ever known. How else could he help her see? Pain's solace, the only comfort he had been able to learn, was the terrible promise that grief always ends. He began to set the table, thinking that it would be good to have dinner waiting for her when she returned. □

Heart versus Time

DAVID HELLERSTEIN

There's nothing worse than getting lost in your own home town. It's 8:33 a.m. of a wet April morning, I'm driving my rented Avis subcompact past midwestern houses, and I'm totally, completely lost.

Eventually, at Cedar and Green, I find a phone booth. I reach the deejay's wife. "No, no, not our *house*," she says, "Phil told the publicity director!"

I sigh. "So where do I go?"

I scrawl down her directions, then roar down Green Road. I park. In the basement of the University's Athletic Building, around the corner from the weight machines, a man is gesticulating frantically inside a control booth, his shouts silenced by double glass windows. He waves me inside with a copy of my book, then jams in a cassette with a commercial, and reaches to shake my hand.

"Hi there, I'm Phil Fink." He looks me over. "So *you're* Herm's oldest boy. Y'look just like him. I've known him since I was ten years old, he kept my Dad alive for years and years." He closes the door, adjusts my microphone. "So, doc, tell us: what's it like to be the great doctor's son?"

Afterwards, I rush down to University Hospital. New buildings seem to have sprouted up in my absence, research labs where empty lots were, parking garages in the place of tenements. I get lost again.

By the time I find the correct amphitheatre and sneak inside, it's already begun. A hundred heart doctors sit in darkness listening to a professor. Slides of dye-infused human hearts flash on a screen. I take an aisle seat, sigh with relief. This is so familiar—the dark lecture, the professorial monotone, the flashing slides. Just like medical school days. Immediately I start to get a headache.

I scan the crowd, looking for my father. Finally I find him—second row center, sitting next to Mom.

This is all for Dad, this *festschrift*, this day of papers by distinguished physicians, this celebration to mark a retirement put off as long as it can be. At 70, according to university rules, procrastination comes to an end; at 70 Emeritus begins. And Dad turns 70 June 6th.

Recently Dad's gotten thicker around the middle, and he takes a mess of pills for his heart and blood pressure—but his hair is still black, he walks like an intern On Call, and 80-hour work weeks don't faze him. In town for a visit, I'll stumble downstairs, 10 a.m. Saturday, and find him already home from the hospital, breakfasting on Sanka and Skippy Super-Chunk on toast. Mid-afternoon he'll go back to the hospital and work until dark. He still attends World Health Organization meetings in Europe; gives papers in Venezuela and Saskatoon; submits grant applications. His exercise lab is funded. Ask about the latest in *New England Journal* or *Circulation* or *Science*, in *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* or *Daedalus*—he knows. Because of that, *because* he's still going strong, the approach of this day has been a matter of dread.

Not just for him, though, but for us kids too. There are six of us altogether—"one for each million," my father has always said. Three boys and three girls. I see Kathryn, the English professor, poet and Yiddish translator, halfway up on the left, beside her fiancé, a medieval Hebrew literature professor. And Susan, just finishing medical school in San Francisco, still gawky from malaria she caught while studying obstetrics in China, is sitting next to Beth, pretty and blond, who has come over from the research laboratory where she's using phages to clone bits of DNA into e. coli. Jon, the environmental scientist, arrives late, and takes a seat behind me. Just before lunch, Dan, the urology resident (or, as he calls it, pecker-checker, or wiener-cleaner), in white coat and pants, sneaks in with the practiced silence of a medical house officer and immediately dozes off.

Then we are all here, all six of us in the same room at once. A rare event. And a major one. We've grown up as—we've always *been*—'Herm's kids.' From elementary school through medical school, teachers would ask, "Are you related to . . ." On the streets, in shopping centers, people would recognize us by family resemblance. In college, classmates would point out his quotes in *Time* or *Newsweek*.

So you might think we'd welcome this moment. Yet recently, for me at least—despite finishing training, starting practice, publishing a book—instead of more confident and certain, I feel the reverse. As though my bearings are lost. As if a traveler returning to New York Harbor on the QE2 discovered the Statue of Liberty had disappeared, only its base remaining.

As the lights come on, I look hard at my siblings. I'm struck by their midwestern healthiness, their particularity of facial expression. A serious gaze, a stubborn, amused attentiveness. We *are* of a set. Do the others feel as I do? I wonder.

Down front, during the break, we begin catching up with each other—last time we were all in one room together was over two years ago. No sooner do we begin, though, than we are interrupted: Dad introducing us around. A Stanford physiologist, a Harvard cardiologist, a Mass General psychiatrist, an Oregon monkey researcher—we vaguely recall their visits to our home, times we ran into them at Dad's lab, or in Vermont two decades ago. They all have something to say about us.

"How'd you do it, Herm?" they ask Dad. "All of them are doing so *well*, they're so happy, so successful . . ."

Moving?

Please let us know.

Arms crossed over his white coat, Dad beams. "It's the Hellerstein genes."

We all groan.

We surround Dad and Mom as visitors come up; it is not hard to put on our best public smiles. Yes, Dad has been a tyrant at times; yes he always was a better talker than listener; yes at a certain point he was as eager to make nearly all of us (Kathryn the poet excluded) into images of himself, doctors, researchers, cardiologists—just as eager as his father, Samuel, the Polish immigrant, had been for him to take over his business, the Star Trouser Company, fifty years ago. Yes, all these things are true. But what the doctors standing around us remark on is even truer.

At lunch there isn't enough to go around—several uninvited guests have dropped in. Dan and Jon go to the cafeteria, and return with cheeseburgers and layer cake, which the rest of us eye greedily from our low-cholesterol tuna and carrot sticks lunch.

Healthy food—the bane of our existence.

From early in childhood, our diet, at Dad's insistence, was low in cholesterol, low in saturated fats. Ice milk instead of ice cream; margarine, not butter; hardly one egg (I was 20 before I ate my first sunny-side-up). Religiously, two decades before the rest of the country, we watched our cholesterol, used stairs instead of elevators, exercised aerobically three times a week, working out on treadmills and bicycle ergometers at Dad's lab. At once we were post-modern and Victorian, midwestern and European—reflecting Dad's predilections. At Dad's insistence, we were innocent of TV and stereo; we played piano and flute and violin and took drawing lessons; for recreation we read Twain and *Scientific American* and whole volumes of the encyclopedia. Dad had invaded Normandy as a young soldier, and had stood at the entrance of Bergen-Belsen by piles of starved Jewish corpses, and was haunted by what he had seen and smelled and so narrowly escaped; and so, through all our childhoods, it was as though any night we six might have to run suddenly into the darkness, fleeing Nazis, leaving everything behind.

But more than anything else, Dad made us scientists. Observing, taking notes on the world, founding hypotheses, collecting data to confirm or disprove them. Our science projects were only the visible, trivial manifestations of a pervasive familial vision. Once, during Beth's violin recital at the Institute of Music, I looked over and discovered Dad drawing a graph on the back of the program: charting heart rate versus time. Would his heart rise or fall with Beth's Vivaldi? I was enraged—what a mockery of music! For years, recalling that scene would make my blood boil.

A dozen years ago, spring of my senior year of college, Dad required emergency heart surgery for a narrowed coronary artery. During my second year of med school (when we were barely speaking), he diagnosed his own pituitary tumor, from a blankness at the edges of his vision. It was safely removed (and he regaled us with details of the procedure). Both times, after a number of months, he resumed his merciless schedule.

"If only we could transplant my brain to a younger body," Dad would say. ("To whose body?" I'd ask in sarcastic moments, "and what would you do with *their* brain?") When we visited my mother's ancient father in the nursing home down Cedar Hill, Dad gestured at the walkers, the wheelchairs and bedpans, whispering: "I'd rather be struck dead than end up here!" I'd know exactly what he meant, though I couldn't agree: The mere fact of chronology, that one's body obsolesces in a decay of DNA even if one's mind is burning with youth. Death in flaming Sherman tanks on Normandy battlefields or in electronic beds of the coronary care unit, an encyclopedic knowledge of the fifty final tremors of the myocardium—these only made the inevitable more irksome, only strengthened defiance.

His 65th birthday passed. Retirement threatened each year, only to be postponed by university authorities. Elder statesmanship was bestowed. The mantel at home became crowded with American Heart Association awards, with heavy silver and ebony plaques and medals, photos of presentations and politicians' handshakes. Dad became the elder of the family as well, his advice asked with regard to marriages, real estate purchases, career decisions. He did all this—adding to his busyness. If anything, he was traveling more, giving more lectures, attending more conferences, checking into more hotels and airports. It was more important than ever that he be heard.

Over these years, my conversations with Dad, once immeasurably difficult, became more friendly, more civil—but also, increasingly, were reports from a distance. Talk about articles written, books in progress, patients seen, lectures given. This past winter, though, the winter of his 70th year, the surprise was to hear uncertainty in Dad's voice—a doubt, a vulnerability never shown before.

"What are you doing to do next?" I'd ask.

There'd be a long pause. "I really don't know," he'd say. "Not sure yet. A lot of possibilities." Then there'd be riffs of inspired ideas. "Get a Ph.D. in molecular biology," he'd say. Or: "Go to the Hastings Center where they do that medical ethics stuff." Or: "Write my autobiography." Or: "Apply for a multimillion dollar grant, on how exercise slows osteoporosis." Or (in black moments): "Retire and move down to Florida, where your mother and I can rot on a beach."

"Oh, you couldn't possibly do that!" I'd respond.

"Well, what do you advise?"

"I don't know. At the least . . . just start to take it easy. You and Mom, take a real vacation, see what it's like not to work so hard."

There was that cruise in the Caribbean they'd been talking about for so long.

"Good idea," I'd say, knowing exactly how likely it was that it would ever happen.

A long pause. "I'll probably just hang on here at Reserve," he'd say. And conversation would veer off into the practicalities of Emeritus life. How he and the hematologist across the hall were the two oldest members of the Department of Medicine. How your salary stopped when you became Emeritus, but how you could keep office space and take home whatever your practice brought in. "Plus—" he'd laugh, "a free parking space for life."

Meanwhile, lying on my bed in Manhattan, looking at the bubbled plaster beneath our leaking skylight, I'd think about his fifty years at the same university—beginning in college, then med school, returning after the War as a junior faculty member, the long years as assistant professor, passed over for promotion, finally, belatedly, becoming full professor. Now—he'd become one of those frail old docs you see hobbling out of Grand Rounds. Then I would feel his sadness, his uncertainty, his vulnerability—and my own unease. I hadn't realized how much stake I placed in Dad's utter certainty.

"Mary!" he'd call to my mother, signaling an end to our conversation, "Talk to your son!"

Yesterday, after appearing on "Morning Exchange" to plug my book, I met Dad for lunch at University Hospitals, in the Doctors' Dining Room.

We sat with a group of Medicine professors. Everyone was in white coats but me. They were discussing the search for a new Chairman. Then DRGs, the new form of medical reimbursement, which to everyone's surprise might begin to erase the hospital's deficit. Then the Cleveland Clinic, the University's longtime rival (which has always seemed to get wealthier as the University grew poorer), which may have overexpanded. Nobody at the table seemed displeased.

After the other doctors left, we ordered coffee (decaf) and dessert (low-cholesterol).

"So," Dad said, "How's your practice going?"

The usual litany was beginning.

"Good," I said. "It's getting full."

He asked about my hospital work, my wife, her job. I answered. We chatted about what kind of word processor he should get to write his memoirs on.

"Are you doing any research?"

I smiled. Dad's fondest dream (and God knows why) was that I become a scientist working in a laboratory. While I never showed much inclination toward or talent for research, I could never tell him as much, could never simply say, "No, and I'm just not interested in research." (After agonizing for years to answer that question, I was flabbergasted to hear my brother Dan answer it with a casual, "No, are you nuts?" And astonished when Dad merely shrugged). This time, though, I had a different answer.

"You won't believe it," I said. "I just had a paper accepted by the *American Journal.*"

"A *research* paper?"

I nodded.

Instead of being pleased, Dad seemed distracted.

"Let's go. I'll show you around the new buildings," he said.

Dad introduced me to one colleague after another all the way out of the Dining Room. We entered the new Outpatient Clinic building, brand new, wide and gleaming as the entrance of a luxury hotel. Walking incredibly rapidly, Dad led me through a maze of hallways, showing me clinics, research labs, hospital wards. The familiar hospital buildings I used to wander through on Saturday afternoons on my way to pick up Dad or to use the lab's darkroom were completely gone—or if still here, were obliterated by gleaming newness. Dad ducked into a stairwell and began bounding up two steps at a time. Running after him, I was still trying to figure out his response to my *American Journal* paper. Was I right to feel put off? To feel hurt? Yet how ridiculous for me to still want his approval!

Five flights up, we came out to a carpeted corridor; my father darted to the right, and we were inside his laboratory.

"I moved here only two years ago," he said. "You may remember, I used to be on the Third floor."

As I tried to catch my breath, I looked around his office. It was the usual clutter of books and papers, plaques and awards, multi-colored plastic hearts, four massive blue volumes containing hundreds of his scientific papers (my oldest sister spent an entire summer cataloging them), the twenty-odd books he's written or edited, along with translations into Italian, Spanish, Japanese.

To the right, the laboratory, once a gloomy linoleum-floored place filled with round oscilloscope screens and slate-gray electronic consoles, now was brilliantly carpeted on floor and walls, and filled with rowing machines, stationary bicycles, a fancy treadmill. Except for the machines to measure oxygen consumption and a bank of computers, it looked like a fancy health club.

"I'll have to pack everything up next month," Dad said, "and move two more flights up."

"Why can't you stay here?"

"Oh," said a bit too casually—"the doctor next door wants to expand."

He hurried me out of the lab, and started down toward the clinic, where there were patients to see. I followed. Maybe, I thought, maybe he's jealous. Ridiculous as it might sound—his hundreds of scientific publications, my first one. That he sees me competing with him. A month ago, at the publication party for my book in New York, a friend asked him, "What's it like having an author for a son?" Dad replied: "I've written twenty books." Could it be as plain as that?

"You coming?" Dad turned into the stairwell and began jogging down. "Y'know, I already have six invitations to speak in September and October. I guess they still want to listen to me."

"You *look* like Herm." A cardiologist shakes my hand. Lunch is over, the afternoon sessions about to begin. "*All* of you do, all six of you. Say, you were on 'Morning Exchange' yesterday, weren't you?"

"Yeah, courtesy of Dad. He called the host and got me on."

"M'wife saw you on TV at breakfast. Recognized you right away as a Hellerstein. You had some interesting things to say about Herm."

I smile. "Told all the family secrets."

Someone's tapping me on the shoulder. I turn. It's Jon, carrying a huge Nikon with motor drive and electronic flash.

"Picture time," he says.

Dad runs up and down the amphitheatre steps, rounding everyone up. "Let's get this show on the road . . . where's your Mother? . . . is Peggy coming back? Mary, get down here!"

Dan puts donkey-ears behind Beth's head; Beth pokes him in the ribs. Electronic flashes cast huge shadows; there's the thump of motor drive, the plasticky slide of advancing film.

"Jon, get in the picture. Give somebody your camera, c'mon, get close!"

"Okay, everyone, try not to look stupid!"

Afterwards, we sit all clumped together, as though rounded up and brought close again by the cameras.

The afternoon sessions begin. A cardiologist-marathoner hobbles forward on inflamed knees and presents research showing (as far as I can tell) that if you run 100 miles a week you'll live about half a day longer. A Harvard psychiatrist tells about treating depressed heart attack victims. Beth gives a talk about her work transplanting genes. Former fellows from Dad's lab present their research, and tell incidental, incriminating stories. In one, Dad and the fellow drive across Cleveland toward Johns Hopkins Airport at 80 mph, late for a plane.

Jon nudges me. "Remember doing that?"

I nod, whisper back: "A thousand times."

"We got to the airport the very moment the plane was scheduled to take off," the doctor says. "So we're both running like crazy, carrying suitcases, boxes of slides. Suddenly Herm stops. He hands me his suitcase and his box of slides. He says, 'Here, take these. Now, run on ahead and tell them to hold the plane.'"

The audience laughs. "That's Dad all right," says Jon.

Next a physiologist speaks. His presentation is about using publicity blitzes to get people to exercise more and eat less fats. In Cleveland, Dad, on an informal basis, has done the same—hence, scrapbooks bulging from 30 years of Cleveland newsclippings, hence my access to local media to publicize my book. Hence the experience my siblings and I have when walking anywhere in the city—of strangers coming forward and addressing us with disconcerting familiarity. Hence, our instant identity, our reflected glory.

After his formal presentation, the professor steps from behind the lectern.

"I want to tell you," he says, "another way Herm's influence has been so important for me and my family."

He tells us: his first child, tragically, became brain-damaged, and he and his wife, despairing, decided not to have any more children. But Dad, in repeated conversations, convinced them to have more children.

He shows slides of his kids: one brain-damaged, two healthy. All are tanned, happy-looking. He is close to tears; the audience too. Even we six, so accustomed to these 'How important your Dad was to my life' stories, feel a twinge.

After the last presentation, we drive home. There's a reception at 7:00 p.m., in an hour and a half, and a formal dinner starting at 8:00. My headache, though faded, still throbs, so I pull off my coat and tie and lie down for a brief nap in Dan's room, where I'm staying. I put my arm over my face.

Now, lying on Dan's antique sleigh-bed, its mattress sagging beneath me, the pillow lumpy behind my head, I hear brothers and sisters thump up and down stairs. And Dad's voice, calling: "Mary, where'd you put my clean shirt?" The shower running, stopping, running again. Phone for Susan, who can't be located. "Susan!" "Susie!" "Susan!" Her voice, finally, "Coming!" Kathryn and her fiancé talking in Beth's old room. Someone—probably Beth—moving around in Susan's old room. Everyone's been shifted around for this visit, displaced.

This is a big house. Three floors, seven bedrooms, a full attic and basement, a two-story garage. A big white Dutch Colonial house, the kind Midwesterners fill with six or eight kids and a century of ancestors' belongings. But now, suddenly, the house becomes too small, creaking and shuddering under our adult weight.

It's hard to believe that we grew up here. That we walked up the block to Roxboro Elementary and Junior High, that we went down the hill to buy *Batman* comics, and later *Mad Magazine*, and later *Playboy* and 3.2 beer; that Dad would get us up early Sunday mornings, and we'd turn our bicycles pedals-up on the asphalt drive, oiling sprockets with 3-in-1 Oil, pumping up balloon tires. And that the whole family would take off up Fairmount Boulevard, a trail of seven, then eight, bicycles, heading toward Squire Valley View ten miles away, Dad leading the way on his Schwinn 5-speed, Mom at the rear on her ancient 28-inch Raleigh. And that we'd go down in the basement to do "experiments" on the hereditarily-obese brown mice Dad liberated from the hospital. And that Dad, returning from conferences in Tokyo or Brussels would bring silver tie-clips and cuff-links for the boys, folding change-purses stuffed with strange coins for the girls. It seems like a lifetime ago, someone else's lifetime.

"C'mon everybody, we're leaving!"

I get up, pull on a suitjacket, straighten my tie. My forehead brushes against the ceiling as I run down the stairs.

Out back, everybody's standing around my rented car and Dad's boxy Oldsmobile, arguing about who should ride with whom. "We're late!" calls Mom. No one seems to hear.

I stand by the white brick wall, looking over into the back yard. I can't get over how different it looks, ever since Dad had the stump of the huge old apple tree torn out, and since a tornado two summers ago knocked down the two cherry trees. Only the old quince remains, leaning arthritically on 2 × 4's for support. In the middle of the back lawn, right where the pitcher would stand when we played baseball, Dad has planted a honey-locust sapling.

"Why'd you put it *there*?" I asked the night I arrived from New York.

He looked at me like I was a dumb younger brother. "So it won't fall against the house when lightning hits it, like the apple tree did."

Beth and Susan finally pile into my car, and Kathryn and her fiancé and Mom into Dad's car, and we all take off down Cedar Hill.

After much consideration, Dad had decided that the best place for the reception was the Automobile Museum.

It's surreal. We stand in the basement gallery, surrounded by enormous old Cadillacs, by Dusenbergs, by Packards, by Pierce-Arrows, by gleaming chrome behemoths larger than some New York apartments. Carrying our drinks and small plates of low-cholesterol hors d'oeuvres, we wander among the dozens of doctors and visiting speakers, the grateful patients ("Your father is wonderful, he saved my life"), the patrons of research, the former secretaries, the family friends. Among the old cars, the hoarded jewels of faded industry, the memories of a rusty city whose biggest glories now are gleaming, ever-expanding hospitals, a city whose boomingest business is disease.

It is among these behemoths that we six finally begin to catch up with each others' lives. Susan tells about traveling in forbidden parts of China, teaching peasants to dance, about her Boston internship starting in two months.

"You going to take Kathy's apartment in Watertown?"

"No, I'm looking in Brookline."

Beth comes by, wearing a puffy-sleeved dress. We congratulate her on her talk. Susan tells me that Beth just moved out of the house, into her own apartment.

"It's weird," Beth says. "Leaving Mom and Dad—they don't know what to do with themselves without kids at home."

"Just look in the refrigerator," Susan says. "Mom still buys for eight."

Kathryn and her fiancé join us. "He won't stop," Kathryn is saying. "He'll work harder than ever. I've tried to ask what he's going to do . . . a sensitive topic."

She asks things about arranging weddings, and then, in the swirling crowd, tells us about the book of Yiddish translations she is finishing, and about the huge anthology about to come out from Berkeley. Dan comes by, and starts telling us about windsurfing on Lake Erie. Jon, camera in hand, jokes that he should list Dan as a toxic waste in one of his environmental standards manuals. Everyone asks Jon and his wife Peggy about their baby. We all stand around, yelling, joking, laughing, Dan shouting out funny names he finds among his patients: Azzizat, Schwinera, LeZar. Susan tells about the baby in Oakland, born prematurely, whose mother named her Urine, because a bottle in the incubator read: "For Urine."

As I stand there, sipping my drink, I think about the old blue wide-finned Plymouth we used to drive up to Canada—seven or eight hundred miles in one day, Dad at the wheel, Mom and a couple of babies up front, three or four kids in the back. How we'd bicker, play games, get sick. How we'd reach Niagara Falls after dark, how we'd roar into the vastness of Ontario, arriving at our destination way past midnight. How above us, on the roof, the heavy luggage rack would make the whole car sway and lurch, as though we were shaken by giants.

And now, standing among the rumble seats, I can see how it will be for us, as adults, having children, living our lives, telling our stories until they begin to condense as myths, myths for each of us, that we will need to propel us on our own trajectories, in six directions from a common source.

There is dinner, healthful of course. And then, of course, speeches. The Chairman of Medicine, the President of the Heart Association, famous cardiologists. They say wonderful things about Dad: the importance of his work in cardiac rehabilitation; his pioneering research on exercise testing; his studies on sex after heart attacks; his impact on American dietary and exercise habits. Up at the head table, next to Mom, Dad looks bemused. After all, two months from now, on July 1, the beginning of the new medical year, everything will change. No longer will Dad have to go to the hospital at 7:00 a.m. to read EKGs with the house officers as he has done for thirty-odd years; no longer will he be leading rounds on the wards; if he teaches, it will be only by special invitation. Thus, the unwillingness that flashes again and again over his face.

Dad gets up to make a speech, thanking associates, benefactors, his staff, his colleagues and students from all over the country. Then, too quickly, it's my turn. I've been asked to add to the "roasting" on behalf of the six kids. Having had a few drinks, I wobble as I stand and make my way to the front of the room. The Chairman of Medicine hands me the microphone, and I look over to Dad, sitting before the gleaming, streamlined fender of a huge ivory coupe. I can almost hear Dad's voice, his greeting: "Well—what's up?" His flat, midwestern vowels. The startling sense I've gotten recently because his voice has begun to sound younger as his options have become wider, so that at times I mistake him for a fourth brother. Standing here, I feel oddly disoriented, lost. When will this end? The fact that my apartment in New York is under construction, that my wife may be pregnant, all this makes it hard to begin.

Eventually I find my voice. I introduce my brothers and sisters, having everyone stand up for a moment. I make some jokes. Then I stare down at the cocktail napkin on which I've written notes: All I can make out is 'violin/graph,' which I stare at uncomprehending. Then I recall: Beth's violin recital at the Institute of Music, Dad charting his heart versus time. My own heart beats fast. As I tell the story, I watch Dad's face, flushed with feeling.

"That life is an experiment." That is how I end. "At best, that's what we six kids learned from him." I could be wrong, but I think I see Dad's eyes glisten.

Afterwards, when guests have scattered, we gather in the Auto Museum lobby, and wander out to where the cars are. The air is treacherous with nostalgia. I think of the white Rambler station wagon we used to drive up to Petoskey, Michigan. The blue Skylark Dad bought me when I turned sixteen, which could barely make it up Old Mill Hill. The white Corvair Dad drove to the hospital, a beat-up little car that rusted through so you could see asphalt flash by underfoot, which was eventually replaced by a red Corvair, then an orange Maverick—a series of undistinguished vehicles that pocked with salt-rust after two winters, cars you could always pick out from across the Doctor's Lot, amid the Mercedes, Lincoln Continentals, and eighteen-foot Toronados the other doctors drove.

It is raining softly, a mild Spring midwestern drizzle. Since Shabbat has begun, Kathy and her fiancé are walking home; Dad and Mom will follow in their car, to make sure they're safe.

The rest of the siblings pile into Jon's and my cars.

I follow Jon out of the lot. For once it's quiet, the banter and constant teasing silenced. I follow Jon past the Institute of Music, and through the University campus, along dark, rain-slicked streets, up Cedar Hill.

Tomorrow, Sunday at the latest, we head back to our lives. Beth to finish moving out. Susan to get ready for a cross-country move, for internship June 15th. Kathryn to leave Boston for Philadelphia, for marriage in two months. Dan, Jon, and I—we too will be back in operating rooms, field-site, clinic. Dad will begin sorting through papers, packing his office for smaller quarters. For the moment, though, all that seems a long way off.

Back at home, we sprawl around the living room, exhausted. We could be back in elementary and junior high school, having just returned by car from Ontario or Michigan, eight hundred nonstop miles across the risen bed of an inland sea. We are silent, recovering from our trip.

Finally the glass vestibule shakes with the opening of the front door, and Dad comes in. He hangs his hat on the rack inside the hall closet door. He finds an old green wooden hanger for his coat. He loosens his tie. For all the ceremony in his return, he might be coming back from an ordinary day of work.

He turns, looking at us as if surprised we're here.

"Well—what's up?" he says, vowels drawn out wide as a river.

"Nothing," we say.

But of course everything has changed. ☐

BARBARA CULLY

WINGS IN SILENCE

The dark town waters off to the edge of the manuscript
where a friend walks, hunched in winter.
It is her last childhood.
Sunset is a blue violet.
The hood she wears is a veil, is a hood.

A pale moon is deserted by a pale sun.
She mourns the words, the sad and enormous mules
it takes to reach you. She tells herself
she is an angel, that she is the one who moves and in moving stirs
your mouth to hers.

You leave her finally still.
The thing she wants is quite gone,
which is to say, the hero dies
tragically and before the thrill
of hearing the thing he loves

demanding that he take it.
(In this way the music drifting in becomes familiar.)
Final like a holiday are your days alone.
The exact point where the lover is the lover was,
an area before sunrise.

In a cactus field, in red,
the billboard boy mimics the billboard girl.
In their dungarees and their androgyny
they are finally in love.
You begin your lover a letter, say,

"That connection we made in that locale
has a wing-span of months, acres of America."
When you walk, silent, what you receive:
Rocks are rose.
A train like a river is the highest thing.

■

The Anthology as Subliminal Message

STEPHEN MINOT

The Bread Loaf Anthology of Contemporary American Short Stories, edited by Robert Pack and Jay Parini. University Press of New England, $12.95 (paper)
Prize Stories, The O. Henry Awards, 1987, edited by William Abrahams. Doubleday, $17.95
Look Who's Talking, edited by Bruce Weber. Pocket Books, $3.95
Blatant Artifice, edited by Edmund Cardoni. Hallwalls, $5.95 (paper)

Among those who ought to know, there is an odd reluctance to define just what constitutes a good short story. It is apparently far easier to classify works, forcing them into real or imagined schools—minimalists, maximalists, well-crafted, magic realists, dirty realists—carefully avoiding the aesthetic question of worth.

To some degree this is a healthy reticence. It guards against literary dogmatism. Proscriptive judgments can be stifling. The well-made story, once revered as the only route to excellence, sometimes appears labored when compared with, say, the conversational informality of Grace Paley or the outright messiness of Barthelme and Kundera. William H. Gass's witty yet proscriptive attack on the present tense in the *New York Times Book Review* (October 11, 1987), takes on a petulant tone—"The kids today!" Personal protestations like these—especially when they appear to spring largely from a resistance to change—make a poor foundation for aesthetic judgment. We don't need a lot of rules about what makes a story good.

On the other hand, refusing to tackle the problem of evaluation at all propels us back into a 1960s subjectivism—"If it turns you on, man." We see this even today in our use of quotation marks as disclaimer: *"Good" fiction* is only allegedly good. The writer is deftly excused from defining his or her terms by treating them in a patronizing manner. Astonishing, the power of punctuation.

The habit of disassociating ourselves from the responsibility of making a value judgment has even spread to conversation. When we are forced to utter the word *good* aloud, we tend to raise two wiggling fingers on each hand in a visual imitation of quotation marks. *Good* has achieved the distinction of being the last four-letter word with the power to embarrass us.

Does this mean that we no longer make value judgments? Hardly. In private conversation we are brazen in our evaluations. "This story is terrific," we say, borrowing the language of publicists. Or, "This really stinks. How could they print it?" No broad tolerance there! And no quotation marks either. When we speak like that we imply that even if the story happened to turn the editor on, it's still fundamentally *bad* and didn't deserve to be printed. And, conversely, that other stories are relatively good. Perhaps *even if we personally dislike them!* But all this is usually off the record. Literary aesthetics has taken on the status of sex for the Victorians: always on our minds but discussed only between consenting adults in the privacy of our homes.

Where should we look for aesthetic statements as to what is truly a good (no quotation marks) short story? Anthologies. Anthologies pretend to be broad and inclusive, but every one is in fact an editor's statement of what is good fiction and, by exclusion, what is bad. Reading an anthology just for the individual stories has its pleasures, but every volume provides an additional message: it presents subliminally a set of value judgments with which we can test and shape our own.

One might think that the preface would be a natural place for an editor to set forth his or her literary standards. Not so. In fact, most prefaces are disclaimers. This is true in three of these four volumes. In fact, disclaimers have become so standardized as to be interchangeable. Robert Pack and Jay Parini, editors of *The Bread Loaf Anthology*, assure us that they "simply have tried to create a representative anthology, one that would reflect the variety and scope of fiction in this country in the late 1980s." William Abrahams, longtime editor of *The O. Henry Awards*, assures us that his collection has "many forms, many voices, many attitudes and intentions. . . ." Bruce Weber, editor of *Look Who's Talking*, insists that the only characteristics that his choices have in common is that they are "by American writers, and . . . written in this century." Only Edmund Cardoni, the most highly opinionated of these anthologists, admits to having a well-defined sense of what is good fiction, but in his case the stories he has selected actually suggest an entirely different set of standards.

The Bread Loaf Anthology of Contemporary American Short Stories is described in the preface as having been drawn from a wide pool. The only limits, we are told, are that each story has been "written within the past five years, and none have yet been published in collections by their authors." Well, almost the only limits. Although the authors selected are not strictly limited to those who have attended the Writers' Conference of that name, "most of them have studied or taught there." This is not literally an old boys' network, since almost half the authors are women, but it does suggest a certain clubbiness. There is a double set of selective factors operating here: Robert Pack quite properly works to bring what he considers to be the best writers to the conference in the first place, and then he and Jay Parini draw what they consider to be the best works from this already select group. All this is their privilege, and their loyalty to the Bread Loaf clan is properly reflected in the title, but it would be a mistake to describe this as an unbiased sampling of American short fiction today.

Like the other anthologizers,

these two define what they believe is good in fiction with their selections. Generally speaking, they place high value on three characteristics: themes that are relatively complex and often layered, plots that are linear, and a tone that is modulated. Exceptions can be found to each of these characteristics, but if student writers were to use this collection as a basic text, these are the literary values which would influence them.

Rosellen Brown's "A Good Deal," for example, is a first-person narration by a man whose father has been living in a hotel for the elderly. The father is frail but still lively in spirit. The plot is complicated when the narrator and his wife learn that the father plans to get married. The woman in question proves to be gracious and charming. But the son's emotions are charged with high ambivalence when he discovers that his beloved father once had an adulterous affair with this very woman years ago.

A story like this has all three elements: a theme which involves the reawakening of Oedipal love and resentment compounded by ethical questions—is there a statute of limitations on the sins of one's father? The plot builds step by step through the course of a few months with side excursions into the past. As for the tone, it carefully guards against sentimentality (though dealing with genuine love of a son for a father) and also against melodrama (though the narrator's anger provides dramatic power at the end). It is a well-made story in that the pieces fit together logically and credibly without appearing to be contrived.

Raymond Carver's "Boxes" also deals with an adult's ambivalent feelings toward a parent—in this case a man and his mother. The mother, a widow, is constantly on the move. She has been living near her son and his woman friend, but now his mother is about to move back to California. The son is delighted in some ways and can't wait to have her out of his life; yet on the other hand he realizes that he may never see her again. There is a rootlessness and a restlessness in all three characters. The plot is less developed than in Rosellen Brown's story, but the subtlety of feeling is as strong. We are drawn into the story and share the emotions of its characters.

By chance or by plan, even the works of those authors frequently associated with highly innovative and nonlinear fiction are represented here with stories that are fairly straightforward in plot and realistic in setting. Mark Helprin, whose fictional imagination often takes dreamlike flight, is represented here in a poetic yet realistic account of a loyal wife during World War II. She works unusually hard as a welder in a factory on the California coast, her special effort motivated in part by a primitive notion that we can control our future through symbolic acts. What others take as patriotic concentration on her job is in fact motivated by her determination to keep her soldier husband from being killed, a form of sympathetic magic. Although the style is poetic in places, the narrative is straightforward and the tone is highly modulated—as is the protagonist's own style of living.

In a similar way, the Joyce Carol Oates story included here, "Surf City," is blue-collar realism. Harvey, the protagonist, is a factory worker who at 31 has been laid off from work. Although he has won $1,150 in the lottery, it doesn't go far. He is filled with anger and frustration. Eventually he goes out drinking with his friends and releases his rage by beating up a motorcyclist. He then returns and has rough sex with his wife. Finally drained of emotion, he sleeps in perfect peace.

The tone of this story is not as modulated as the others I have described, but no one is killed and the conclusion is restrained. The portrait Oates provides of Harry is stark realism and utterly convincing. The story has some of the same qualities as John Updike's "Poker Night," a short, first person narration about a man who has been told that he has cancer and then goes out to play poker with the boys. Updike's story is more subdued than that of Oates, but the effect is similar: We have the feeling that we have met a stranger and have come to know him in a very short time.

To be sure, there are a few stories in this collection that are unmistakable exceptions to these recurring characteristics. Ron Hansen's "Nebraska" is really no more than a poetic essay on the folksy aspects of a Nebraska town, a piece that is entertaining without quite qualifying as fiction at all. And Robert Houston successfully goes for laughs in "Lawfully," a funny but trivial piece that may have been included mainly as a change in pace. But there are no more than four out of 23 stories that do not contain a fairly complex and serious set of thematic suggestion, a linear plot, and a relatively modulated tone.

It is worth noting in passing that the most frequently represented magazine in this collection is *The New Yorker*. Four stories were first published in that magazine. No other magazine is represented more than twice and most only once. Although *The New Yorker* has long championed the nonlinear, mosaic style of Donald Barthelme and the episodic, vaguely structured work of Ann Beattie, these approaches have never dominated their choice of fiction. The qualities of restraint and subtlety have. It is no accident that this anthology has drawn so heavily from this particular magazine, for they tend to agree on what constitutes good fiction.

The O. Henry Awards for 1987 is the latest in a remarkable series. With the exception of only two years, it has appeared regularly from 1919 to the present. Doubleday and Company deserves credit for sustaining this tradition through decades when the short story was far less popular than it is today.

William Abrahams was co-editor from 1964 to 1966 and has been sole editor since 1967. That means he has had 20 years to shape and reshape his view of what good fiction is, and the pool from which he drew appears to have been considerably larger than that of *The Bread Loaf Anthology*. The list of magazines consulted contains more than 150 titles, many of which are quarterlies. By conservative guess, he may have read some 800 stories from which to select 20 titles. This alone does not guarantee greater variety, but it must surely nudge an editor in that direction.

Although Abrahams in no way rejects the literary standards that shaped the standards in *The Bread Loaf Anthology*, he does add two additional values. These influence the choices he makes and, in the process, his implied definition of what makes a good short story. First, he places a higher value on dramatic impact. Second, he is more concerned with innovative approaches.

These differences are immediately evident in the two opening stories which share the first prize. "Fleur" by Louise Erdrich is one of those stories anyone who has been a judge for contests will recognize: the type that leaps out of the stack, aglow and vibrant. The opening sentence is a model attention-getter: "The first time she drowned in the cold and glassy waters of Lake Turcot, Fleur Pillager was only a girl." At the end of that paragraph we learn that the two men who saved her later disappeared. Not only that, but the narrator's grandmother figures they got what they deserved. Not content with this, the next man who saves her eventually drowns in his new tin bathtub.

Described in the abstract like this, the protagonist sounds like another primitive, part-mythic superwoman—an American Indian this time, not a precocious cave woman—well equipped to put men in their place at long last. Erdrich does take enormous chances at every turn—the name *Fleur Pilager*, for example. And the name of the man who saved her the second time, *George Many Women*. Yet somehow she gets away with it. How? Partly it is the setting (an ill-defined Western territory resembling the author's native North Dakota) and partly the historical distance (the 1920s); but mostly it is the slightly opaque, Faulknerian style that blends raw realism with Indian mythology. Only an astonishingly skillful myth-maker and story teller could succeed in drawing readers into a tale like this.

Although "Fleur" shared the first prize in this anthology and unmistakably has the feel of an award-winning work, it seems unlikely that it would have been accepted at all in the *Bread Loaf Anthology* even if Louise Erdrich had been a member of the club in good standing. Her story is simply too lacking in restraint. There are three deaths on the first page (not counting her symbolic drownings), and the climax is bedazzled by a tornado, a herd of cattle flying through the air "like giant birds, dropping dung," and the slaughter of all the male characters, their deaths described in graphic detail. It is not a modulated story.

Joyce Johnson shares the first prize with her story "The Children's Wing." In some respects, this story is the opposite of "Fleur." It is a mother's realistic account of what it is like to have her son, Nicky, in the children's wing of an old New York hospital for a considerable time. His ailment is baffling and possibly life-threatening. His stay is made more difficult by the arrival of a highly disturbed young man who has been placed in the children's wing because there is no space for him in psychiatric wards. Although this eerie on-again-off-again psychotic does nothing more serious than light matches in the faces of other children, his presence is a continuing threat.

Eventually Nicky survives and at 13 rejoins the world of those who can trust their bodies. "Nicky," we are told, "got well but he got old." No cyclones, no deaths—at least on a literal level. No flirtation with melodrama. But the entire story rests on a substrata of sustained anxiety. One expects catastrophe at every turn. The expectation itself leaves one exhausted at the end—an echo of the emotion of that fictional mother.

Different as this story is, it remains high-risk fiction. While Erdrich knowingly flirts with melodrama, Johnson risks sentimentality. A less skillful writer would have stepped over the line, would have unintentionally given us the feeling that our emotions were being manipulated in the cynical manner of television's dying-child plots. But Joyce Johnson's direct, unadorned, non-self-pitying tone is so convincing that we never doubt its sincerity. Literary risk-taking is not by itself a measure of excellence any more than the daring of a trapeze act makes it artistically superior to ballet, but innovation that is made to work does add to a story that is already rich in suggestion. Not all of Abraham's choices reflect this respect for risky performance, but he has clearly included it as one of several ingredients in his definition of a good short story.

Helen Norris is no less daring in her story "The Singing Well." Told in a Georgia rural dialect that is distinct from that of other southern writers, it deals with a solitary, independent girl of eleven who befriends her grandfather. The old man has returned for a visit, but his memory has almost gone. He cannot even recall his favorite granddaugher—though he says of her, "You feel right. Somehow."

In a strange, dreamlike ritual, she brings her grandfather to an old well, hoping to assist him. But it is too late. Eventually he is locked away. Only after "a dozen summers were gone, it must have been when her child was born, she heard the cry of the thing they had found. She heard the singing inside of her." The subtle yet strong links between the very old, the young, and the newborn are explored in this story with greater subtlety and depth than is seen in a great deal of contemporary poetry.

After reading innovative stories like that, we are not surprised to see a lighter, more whimsical sample by Donald Barthelme. "Basil From Her Garden" is, like most of his work, short, ironic, fragmentary. It is all in the form of questions and answers—though unanswered questions predominate. Barthelme once again abandons plot altogether and more or less dispenses with characterization. We call it fiction for lack of a better term, but we could just as easily call it a prose poem for two voices. Or a Platonic dialogue for two stoned speakers. Yet it has its own earnest concerns, in a manner of speaking.

> Q—Ethics has always been where my heart is.
>
> Q—Moral precepting [sic.] stings the dull mind into attentiveness.
>
> Q—A new arrangement of ideas, based upon the best thinking, would produce a more human moral order, which we need.
>
> Q—Apple honey, disposed upon the sexual parts, is not an index of decadence. . . .

It is most appropriate that these are presented as questions. Barthelme is not readily drawn to answers.

When Barthelme first started with these nonfiction fictions in the mid-sixties, Ionesco had been doing something similar on the stage and Beckett was not far off. It all seemed very daring. Now, twenty years later, Barthelme continues undaunted. There is something daring in his tenacity.

There are times when Abrahams goes for works that have more impact than innovation. Jim Pitzen thrusts us into the Vietnam war in "The Village," and the story makes full use of those details that turn every war into a continuing hell. But it is not unrelentingly blood-and-agony realism. The opening takes a long view, describing a village that has been destroyed over and over, sometimes by war and sometimes by nature; and the story's closing returns to that long view in a brief epilogue. This is hard-impact fiction by a writer who has been there, but it is also sensitive fiction by an author who has a capacity to use words to create something more than photographic realism.

All this is not to suggest that *The O. Henry Awards* is dominated by stories with high emotional impact and literary innovation. A majority of these stories would not seem out of place in *The Bread Loaf Anthology*, and they are among the best. Alice Adams maintains her high standard in "Tide Pools," the story of a divorcée who goes back to California to help a childhood friend recover from alcoholism and gradually, unmistakably, becomes a discreet wino herself. It is told, as are so many of her stories, so simply, so totally without author's intrusion, that the theme of alcoholism glides into our consciousness almost as subtly as it can in real life.

In the same vein of subtle revelation is James Lott's "The Janeites," the story of an aging Jane Austen fan who must care for his wife, who is seriously in the grip of Alzheimer's disease. Concerned with the subtleties of *Emma* and disturbed by what he sees as a loss of sense and sensibility all about him, he appears to be a sad and powerless individual—until we learn that he is carefully withholding lethal pills for a joint suicide.

These stories all meet the standards of complexity and restraint that distinguish Robert Pack's selections. What differentiates this volume, however, is that recurring admiration for daring. As a result, the collection as a whole gains a breadth that one looks for in an anthology of good short fiction.

Look Who's Talking, edited by Bruce Weber, draws from the widest pool of all four of these volumes. He is not focusing on authors associated with a writers' conference, nor is he limited to those works published within the past year. Although at least half the authors represented are living, he has also included stories by major figures like Faulkner, Hemingway, and Conrad Aiken.

Weber's controlling concern is an author's voice. As a result, he has selected stories in which we as readers imagine a speaker. The collection is divided into three sections. The first is limited to stories written in the first person, though without an identified listener. In the second section, "Directed Voices," each story is written as if addressed to an audience. The third and final section is made up of stories that echo the spoken word yet are presented in the third person.

Weber explains the source of his concern with voice in his preface. His mother was one of those who consistently botched anecdotes. When she received laughter, it was not for the material but for the way she told it. Then the children would say, "'Dad, you tell it,'" and the same story would be told with wit, control, and inventiveness. No wonder Weber went on to be a teacher and editor!

Many authors think of a story as a spoken narrative because they have been exposed as children to good story tellers. While the art of telling a lengthy anecdote is associated most often with the South and with New England, it flourishes wherever people read books. One might think that television would have driven this approach to fiction into oblivion, but it hasn't. First-person writing is in an all-time ascendancy.

This points to one of the most interesting aspects of the anthology, one that may have eluded the editor himself. When he selected stories written in the first person without an identified audience, he could draw from some of the youngest and best of our short story writers. Mary Robison and Susan Minot (a distant cousin of mine), for example, and writers only slightly older, like Raymond Carver, Grace Paley, and Richard Ford. Only one, Eudora Welty, represents an older generation.

As soon as Weber turns to what he calls "directed voices," however, he must reach back to the 1930s and '40s and include authors like Ring Lardner and John O'Hara. More surprising still, when he casts about for third-person stories that have a distinctive voice, only three out of 13 authors are even alive!

This concentration on first-person narration by younger writers is a true reflection of the literary scene in the 1980s. Even William Abrahams, with no restrictions on choice other than the year of publication, found that just under half the stories in his anthology turned out to be in the first person. "Such an outpouring can't be shrugged off as mere coincidence," he writes in his introduction. "It suggests a deeply felt need." Weber is not interested in probing the reasons for this. In fact, he does not even make note of it. But his collection is fascinating in its bifurcation: the voice of the '80s contrasted with all those that came before. It is more than a mere academic contrast. Moving from Doctorow, Paley, or Robison back to Ring Lardner's "Haircut," John O'Hara's "Pal Joey," or John Cheever's long-enduring "The Enormous Radio" seems like a flight in H.G. Wells's time machine.

For those seriously interested in fiction, this anthology offers a range of contrasts not found in the other three. Similarities and differences play off each other like the strangely disturbing color contrasts in an Albers painting. Here is but one of many such striking juxtapositions:

Jay McInerney's "It's Six A.M. Do You Know Where You Are?" is a highly contemporary insider's view of a trendy, stoned guy who finds himself at either the Bimbo Box or the Lizard Lounge. What he needs to clear his head is a little more Bolivian Marching Powder. He tells his story in the least promising of all persons, *you*:

> You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning. But you are here, and you cannot say that the terrain is entirely unfamiliar, although the details are a little fuzzy.

Somehow we come to believe in him. We even believe the girl with the bald head and the scar, "like a long, sutured gash" tattooed on her scalp. I don't know how he does it, but we really give a damn when at the end of the evening he finds himself begging for a bag of hard rolls.

Where did that style come from? Even genius doesn't create fiction from nothing. Part of the answer comes, astonishingly, from John O'Hara's old chestnut, "Pal Joey." O'Hara's voice is as dated as zoot suits and War Bonds. It comes to us as a badly-spelled letter that starts off,

> Dear Pal Ted:
> Well, at last I'm getting around to knocking off a line or two to let you know how much I apprisiate it you sending me that wire on opening nite.

The world here is small-time showbiz. The two stories are similar in that they create a sharp, detailed picture of a lively subculture with its own customs, costumes, and language. The fact that Joey's world has now been popularized on the level of musical comedies does not alter the fact that one of the original pleasures of the fiction was an apparently genuine (though actually sanitized) view of an environment not familiar to most readers.

There is another connection between these two apparently dissimilar stories. It is the creation of the voice. I have never understood the appeal, the function, or the justification of telling a story as McInerney does as if it were direct address. When the subject comes up (which is rare, I'm glad to say), I begin to sound like William Gass on the subject of the present tense. But by placing these two most disparate stories in the same volume, Weber has suggested a credible source of the trendy *you* form: it is an echo of epistolary style. It's not a copy, of course, since the writer is addressing himself. Dear diary. But the connection is strong enough so that once we are plunged into such a story, it begins to sound natural.

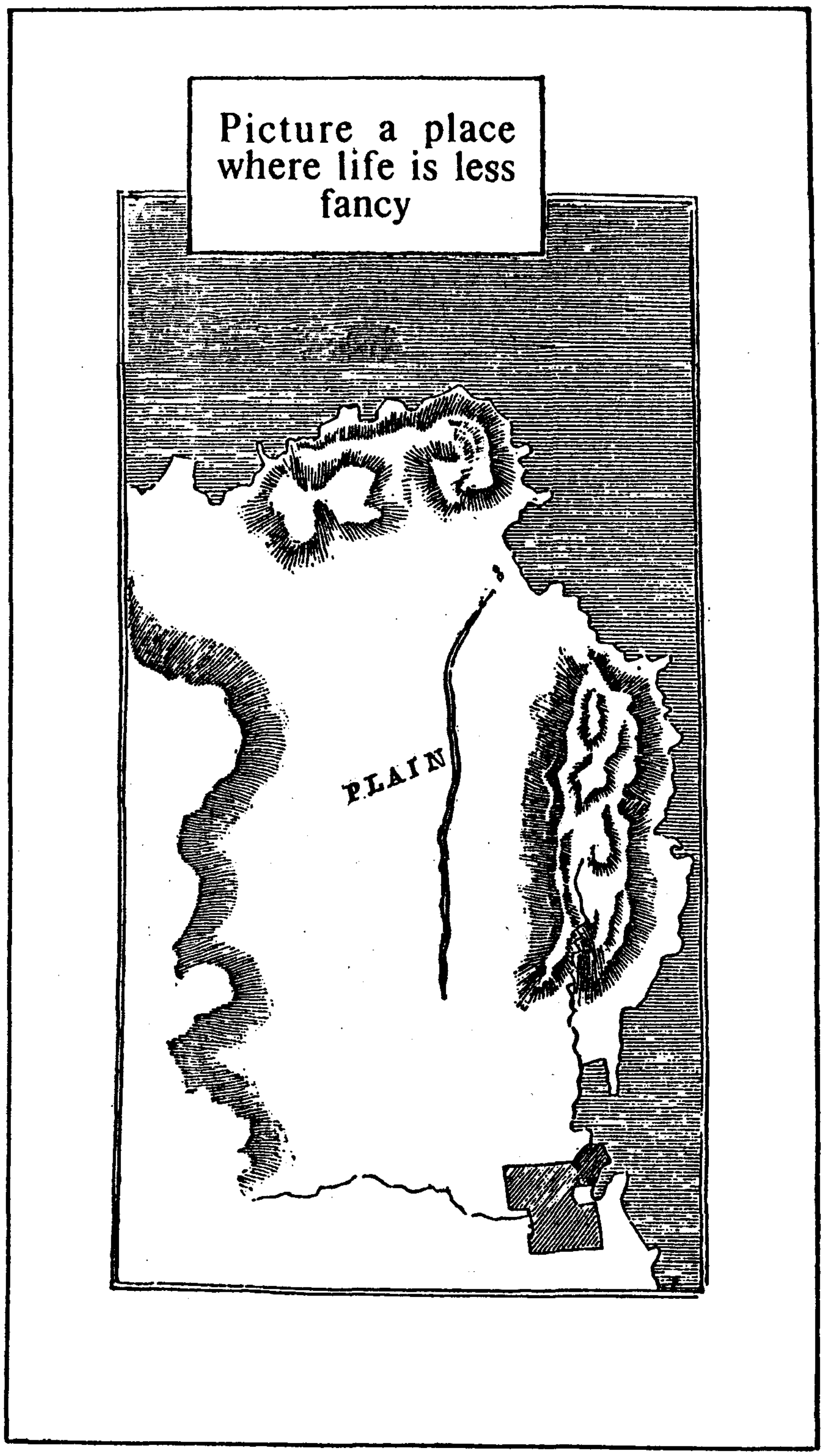
I have placed Edmund Cardoni's anthology *Blatant Artifice* last not because it is the best or the worst but because there is a kind of continuum here, running from *The Bread Loaf Anthology* at the conservative end of the scale to a kind of radicalism at the other. Where Robert Pack stresses subtlety in statement, Cardoni is often drawn to blatant effects. Where Pack is drawn to the linear plot, Cardoni declares all forms of plot as the enemy of fiction. Where Pack prefers a modulated tone, Cardoni goes for broke.

Cardoni's introduction to *Blatant Artifice* opens with what seems like a gratuitous attack on David Leavitt (whose fiction he has not read) and Jay McInerney, whose highly innovative story I have described above. He refers to them as "tyke idols who are supposed to be the cream of my generation" and "uptown neotweeds." He insists on spelling McInerney's name as *McIrninny* and sustains his attack for four out of the seven-page introduction. All this appears to be deeply felt, but for the rest of us it has the baffling inexplicability of Lebanese street fighting.

Along with this barrage, Cardoni does present a definition of what he believes a good story is—though largely in negative terms. Above all, fiction should *not* be "well crafted," a term which he defines as "drearily linear, slavishly realistic, stylistically vapid, and verbally lifeless." He does *not* want to see "stories about recognizable contemporary experience, predominantly white, educated, middle-class family experience bloodlessly severed from any messy historical, political, or economic context." What he *does* want is what *Granta* calls "dirty realism" (see their Issue 8), though Cardoni wants "more dirt and a lot less realism."

All that is kind of refreshing after going through *The Bread Loaf Anthology*. It isn't my notion of good fiction, but there's something to be said for a rousing Sousa march if you've listened too long to Gregorian chants. The odd thing is that there is very little correlation between Cardoni's radical manifesto and the stories he has selected.

In all fairness, the authors repre-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sented in this volume were mainly limited to those who were invited to Hallwalls, a nonprofit center for contemporary arts in Buffalo. And the editor does apologize for the fact that the selections are not "*blatantly* political enough for my taste." Still, it is a bit surprising after the thunder of that introduction not to have a single story expressing black rage against the injustices of this society, not one piece protesting U.S. foreign policy, and not a single story dealing with the life of gays in a largely hostile environment.

Instead, what he has gathered is a group of stories that are, on the whole, good fun and irreverent—a kind of "Saturday Night Live" in print. Mark Leyner's "Lines Composed After Inhaling Paint Thinner," for example is a satiric monologue in which he cheerfully makes fun of our society as a world populated by robots. Its humor has touches of Brautigan (remember him?) and Barthelme. It's a thoroughly enjoyable piece and well worth publishing, but the author has been placed in a tough position, coming on stage with a clever skit after the M.C. has promised all-out war on the world as we know it.

Another delightful piece is Norma Kassirer's "No Democracy in Miracles or in Art." In this fantasy, Francis of Paula deals with Pope Sixtus Four in the long and taxing business of earning sainthood.

"'Listen,'" the Pope says, "'you're nervous, right?. . . . It's only natural . . . You're a bright guy, you know you're being watched. There's lots of others up for sainthood too, real pros. But look, don't worry so much, no one expects you to be perfect.'"

A nice premise, that. And it's developed with more ingenuity than any television skit.

One of the few stories that begins to develop a credible character is "The Home of Saints and Angels School" by Carole Southwood. It deals with a fourteen-year-old girl named Abdoo who is sent to a home for young girls "who had no place to go or who were bad." She learns to get along with the sisters and with her fellow prisoners. She escapes at one point but is returned. The details are credible, but the tone is never depressing. The ending is a puzzle even after successive readings, but the story as a whole is memorable nonetheless.

The final piece in this anthology is inexplicable. It is a letter from Jane Brakhage, wife of the film producer, explaining how she used to do some public speaking but is now afflicted with stage fright and so has given it up. Just that. Did she even know that this was going to end up in an anthology of stories? It's not a criminal offense to pad an anthology with a stray letter, but there is something bothersome about it for those who take publishing seriously.

My feeling is that these stories are entertaining, often clever, occasionally witty, and serve the reader well after a hard day of more serious reading. I recommend buying the book. But as a definition of good fiction, it leaves a lot out. Conviction, for one. And compassion. Subtlety of expression. Depth of feeling. Must all those be sacrificed when one throws out plot and characterization?

Each of these four anthologies presents its own definition of good fiction—not in the preface, but in the stories themselves. It would be tempting to fall back on the platitude that there are many definitions, all good. But there we would be, back in 1969 again, talking about what turns you on. My own impartial and objective view is that there is a bell curve here. The standards of *The Bread Loaf Anthology* strike me as somewhat limiting. Too much restraint and modulation is restrictive. At the other end of the curve, is the aptly titled *Blatant Artifice* with its satire, wit, and ingenuity. This too is restrictive. Rejecting linear plot and characterization and familiar settings is as proscriptive in its own way as requiring order, restraint, and realism.

This leaves *The O. Henry Awards* and Bruce Weber's voice-oriented *Look Who's Talking* at the top of our bell curve. When you define fiction as they do, you allow considerable latitude. Both these volumes imply that to be really good, a story must serve both heart and mind and do it with some subtlety and freshness.

If I were forced to choose just one of these four anthologies, I think I would select Weber's volume. True, he has a few too many old chestnuts, but the collection as a whole suggests fresh ways of looking at the genre. One can learn a lot from this anthology, and the first lesson is a true respect for the astonishing variety that the short story offers both to writers and to readers. ☐

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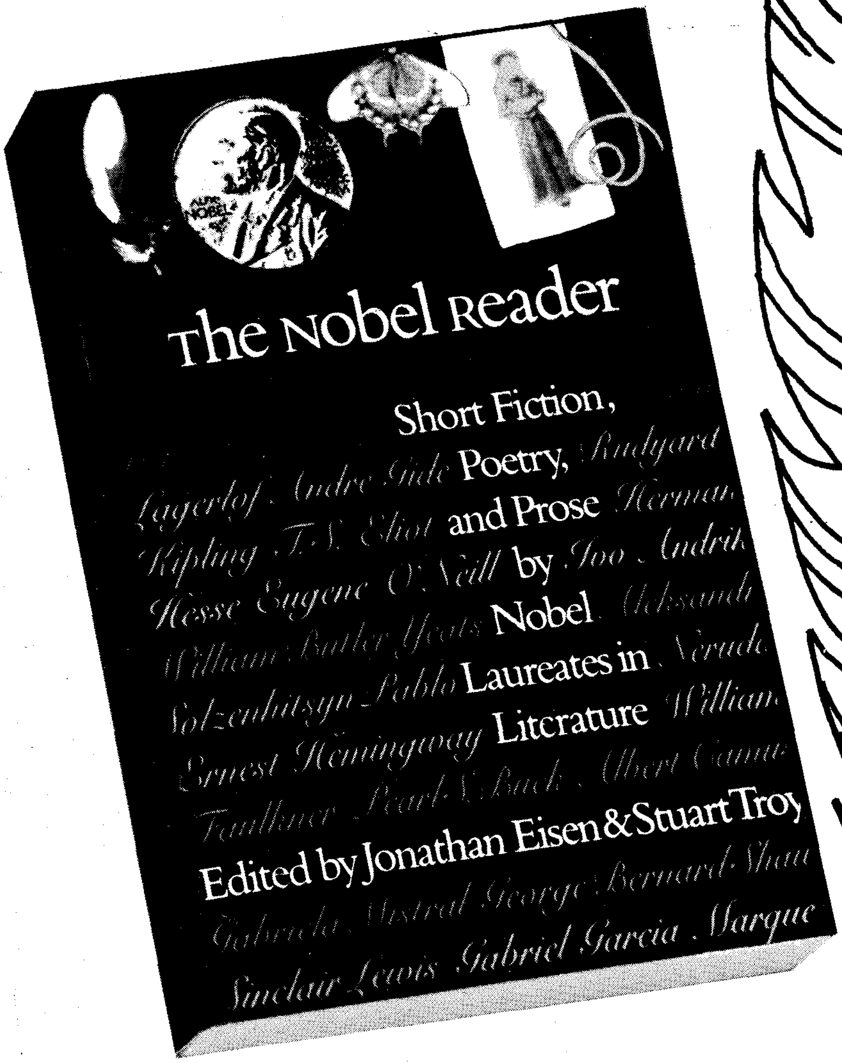
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